CHAPTER 3

The Construction of Arguments

Theoretical claims and empirical generalizations are combined in three research traditions that I shall call "paradigms of inquiry": multivariate, interpretive, and historical. Multivariate and interpretive paradigms are pervasive in the social sciences. The historical paradigm has an ambiguous status; it is seen sometimes as combining the others, sometimes as having a special identity. In any particular work, one paradigm is usually in the "foreground" of the argument—the focus of both theory and evidence—and others are in the "background," providing rhetorical credibility or simply taken for granted. The construction of a multivariate argument about correlations of variables often assumes symbolically meaningful relations among the actors and also frequently takes for granted the specific historical context within which the data are collected; the construction of an interpretation of the symbolic meanings of action may take for granted both historical processes and underlying multivariate relations; the construction of a historical narrative may presuppose symbolic meanings and multivariate relations among events. Each paradigm of inquiry thus "borrows" from the others. Mixtures of paradigms maximize validity claims for an argument.

Each paradigm is associated with an epistemological assumption about the meaning of "theory" and "evidence." Such seemingly neutral categories "theory," "evidence," and "explanation" themselves contain contested assumptions. Every theoretical claim, like any other aspect of social life, is located within a historical context, refers to or implies multivariate relations, and resonates with symbolic meanings. The relative importance of each of these aspects of a theoretical claim depends on the particular research question being asked (the "foreground" of the argument), the kinds of assumptions being made (the "background" of the argument), and the kinds of evidence being sought.

Some argue that each paradigm of inquiry entails a characteristic and unique combination of theoretical claims, methodological procedures, and empirical generalizations that cannot be translated into the language of other paradigms. This claim of "incommensurability" might be held by those who see art and science as completely different worlds of cognition. This is not the way in which "paradigm" is used in this book.

Others see paradigms of inquiry as constructed from the standpoint of the analyst, whose choice of assumptions and perspective is not constrained by standards beyond his or her preferences and prejudices. Still others see paradigms as constrained by universal and impersonal principles of logic and coherence. In this view, the correspondence of concepts to reality derives from objective and neutral criteria for drawing inferences from empirical claims.

My classification of paradigms, like the working vocabulary, is a device to clarify different ways of grasping social phenomena. There are multiple ways of extracting evidence from what is "out there" and assembling them into meaningful arguments. My goal is a pragmatic one: to help clarify the sequences of choices to be made as you thread your way carefully through a minefield of political ideologies, scholarly traditions, professional norms, and career necessities.

Theoretical claims—in order to be recognized as legitimate—must be couched in the language used by the members of the intellectual community who are the direct audience for the work: readers, students, colleagues. The indirect audience in the mind of the writer is those ancestors to whom she is giving homage as well as those antagonists whose arguments she is challenging. The audience being addressed normally shares some basic assumptions about the character of human motivations and human needs that underlie the concepts of the argument. Theoretical constructions are like any other social constructions in this sense, and the theorist is part of the social process that establishes the cultural meanings of the concepts being used to describe and explain the phenomenon.

Concepts, the building blocks of theories, also exist in a comparative and historical context, in which they are given particular meanings. A rigid and fixed definition that isolates a concept from its social context and from its history prevents you from seeing these relations. Concepts are also "historical" in the sense that they derive from intellectual traditions in which their meanings have become customary. Constraints on the use of concepts derive from the traditions that have given them certain meanings in the literature of the field. These meanings cannot be arbitrarily and idiosyncratically changed by the next user, precisely because their use resonates with their history and affects how the reader will understand them. At the time you are designing a research project, you cannot possibly be aware of all the historical and conceptual traditions that lie beneath and beyond your work, and yet they have enormous consequences.

Multivariate explanations must be distinguished from "causal" explanations. Because of the legitimacy of "normal," unitary science, the language of causality underlies the research practices of multivariate analysis. Linear correlation models, regression analyses, path analysis, and the other statistical tools of the multivariate paradigm are suffused with the metaphor of "cause." Quantitative correlations of two or more variables are frequently described with the words "effect of," "influence of," "determinant of," "factor in," or "explained by,"
The distinction between theory and evidence is drawn from the positivist philosophy, although my own theory of knowledge assumes that the distinction plays a variety of roles in different kinds of paradigms. Without evidence of the motives and intentions of actors or in terms of the historical processes that explain outcomes, or they can be inferred from residual correlations after the application of statistical controls. But, regardless of the paradigm being used, causation cannot be inferred directly from the evidence.

The claim that multivariate analysis is the only "scientific" paradigm is part of a challenge to the importance of historical and interpretive paradigms. If multivariate analysis of many cases, employing a carefully specified model with reliable and valid indicators, were the only legitimate goal of social science, then this language would be warranted. But that is certainly not the case. Good work in social science answers many kinds of questions, within the several paradigms, as you shall see.

EVIDENCE AND THEORY

The distinction between theory and evidence is drawn from the positivist philosophical tradition, although my own theory of knowledge assumes that the distinction plays a variety of roles in different kinds of paradigms. Without evidence, research cannot be done. Even works that do not analyze any evidence are grounded in other works that do. The availability of relatively cheap and usable evidence decisively shapes the kinds of research questions that can be answered. Libraries, data archives, censuses, historical archives, records of community organizations, and government repositories are currently available to most students and scholars. As the society changes, the availability of evidence changes, not only in the codified form represented by libraries and computer files but also in archives of, for example, movies or videotapes. Once in existence, these sources of evidence become collective resources for future social research.

The state of research technology—computers, statistical programs for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, libraries of data, citation indexes—decisively affects the possible choices of different kinds of evidence to answer different questions. The widespread diffusion of particular statistical programs (SPSS and SAS in the United States, for example) has meant that certain kinds of statistics can be computed very easily and others are difficult. Because of the availability of this technical resource, students learn to think about—and even formulate—their research questions in ways that are amenable to treatment by the particular statistics available to them. Around the techniques is built an institutional infrastructure—research centers, data archive organizations, criteria for a publishable article—that makes certain kinds of empirical analyses not only available and relatively cheap but also legitimate. As someone said in another context, if a hammer is available, uses will be found for it. The result is that the theoretical assumptions about the social world that are built into the empirical techniques become embedded in the practices of research.

The very existence of data formatted in particular ways also affects the historical situation. A good example is the impact of census categories on the funding of social programs in urban ghettos, where funding is earmarked for certain "groups" identified by the census ("ethnic," "racial"). As the historical situation changes (for example, if racial intermarriage increases), those empirical categories become increasingly erroneous measures of the underlying social realities. And the empirical categories themselves have enormous consequences. A person might find himself forced to identify as "black," for example, if he has a black father and a white mother.

When surveys are reported in newspapers or other media, people may redefine their conceptions of themselves and their behavior may change. An example is the Kinsey surveys of sexual behavior that reported higher incidences of certain forms of sexual behavior than were commonly believed. Kinsey may well have changed future sexual behavior by convincing people that their sexual preferences were neither weird nor abnormal.

A great variety of primary ("first order") evidence is used in the social sciences. Some of these sources of evidence are what might be called "found" or "natural," because the scholar does not create them: government archives, journals, newsmagazines, travelogues, census documents, memoirs, minutes of meetings, correspondence, dictionaries, posters, newspapers, videotapes, photographs, programs, poetry, novels, "texts" of all kinds. Others are "constructed" or "created": field notes of naturally occurring human activities in real-life situations, interviews, questionnaires, videotaped conversations. Other types of evidence are secondary sources: accounts of historical events by historians, an interpretation of primary sources by someone else, a data archive holding other scholars' surveys.

Evidence is sometimes produced by technically trained observers who record their observations in ethnographic studies, conduct sample surveys of populations, obtain life histories from individuals, or dig through archives to find textual evidence of intentions and actions. Sometimes evidence is generated by the routine activities of bureaucracies, where agents in different locations throughout the society report at regular intervals the incidence of certain types of social behavior: births, deaths, marriages, divorces, crimes, arrests, suicides, work, purchases. In censuses of the population, individuals voluntarily report the ages, incomes, and occupations of themselves and the persons living with them (the "family" or "household"). More mundane evidence of human behavior includes garbage, advertising, theater posters, and graffiti. All of these social phenomena—whether summarized as a statistical table, presented as images, or collected as a sequence of words—constitute evidence for theoretical claims.

At the lowest level of abstraction, a working consensus exists about "facts" that almost no one will disagree about. A few examples suffice to make the
point: Rodney King was hit more than once by more than one policeman on March 26, 1991, in Los Angeles; black unemployment was higher than white unemployment in the United States in 1991; females earned less than males in the same occupations in the United States in 1990; per capita energy consumption was higher in 1997 in the United States than in India; the concept of bureaucracy is more important in Weber’s theories than in Marx’s.

The actual evidence necessary to establish the truth or falsity of such statements may be difficult to obtain, and clearly the categories contained in the statements are theory laden (occupation, earnings, energy, bureaucracy). But that their significance rests on theoretical inferences can hardly be disputed. Was Rodney King “beaten” or “subdued”? Does being a “parent” mean the same thing for men and for women? Does living in a “racially homogeneous urban area” mean the same thing for blacks as it does for whites? These are examples of what may seem like simple empirical issues of measurement that can become theoretically problematic as well as politically charged “facts.”

Truth is inversely correlated with substantive importance. The more verifiable a statement is, the less significance it has. Thus, the evidence necessary to “prove” a theoretical claim can never be completely specified. General statements that have significance are at a level of abstraction where the potentially relevant facts necessary to assess significance are not only almost unlimited but almost always contested.

What you make of such evidence is always socially constructed, because no product of human activity explains itself. All of these forms of evidence presuppose a society within which they are symbolically meaningful. “Secondary” texts—the interpretations of the significance of the primary “objects”—are themselves an aspect of the evidence.

The legitimacy of different claims to constitute evidence is frequently debated. What constitutes a legitimate “field observation,” for example? How much bias or sampling error can be tolerated in a survey? What is the relative credibility of different historical documents about an event? Disciplines develop operating procedures that guide inquiry, including rules about the quality and the relevance of evidence. The development of a consensus (a so-called “warranting community”) on the validity of procedures that construct and interpret evidence is central to all paradigms of inquiry.

Evidence is also historically contingent. As a discipline improves technically, as knowledge accumulates, and as generalizations previously taken for granted are criticized, the standards of evidence required to support a given argument are raised. And, as the evidence produced by the society changes (e.g., videotapes, e-mail messages, audiotapes), so does the historical evidence available for social inquiry.

Each type of evidence must be converted to the appropriate form recognized by a theory in order to be defined as appropriate for generalization and explanation. A multivariate paradigm does not recognize as primary data any evidence that has not been converted into a “variable” (i.e., a count of some aspect of human behavior classified into attributes of some entity) and regarded as a sample from a defined population. Texts or narratives of events are primary for a historical paradigm but must be converted to variables by a coding process in order to be available for a multivariate analysis.

Similarly, an interpretive paradigm must be able to convert primary evidence into something culturally or symbolically meaningful. Take field notes from a participant observation of a natural site, for example. Within an interpretive paradigm, they are then seen as first-order evidence, although they have been gathered on the basis of selective principles and initial abstractions from the raw notes. Field notes can be redefined as “texts” and used to infer something about an event in order to be available for a historical paradigm. Similarly, field notes must be coded into variables that can then be associated with each other and with other variables in order to be amenable to multivariate analysis.

Take a historical text as an example. Tocqueville’s nineteenth-century classic Democracy in America was originally a work of cultural interpretation, based on interviews, field notes, and documents. It has become a text that could be used as evidence within different paradigms: evidence for categories of interpretation used by French observers of America, evidence about the nature of American political culture in the nineteenth century, or raw data that could be coded for a quantitative study of the frequency of occurrence of the words “justice,” “equality,” and “democracy” as representative cultural symbols.³

Take a census table that contains quantitative data on occupation by gender for several decades as another example. Within the multivariate paradigm, it is direct evidence for the relationships of the variables in the table. Counts of attributes of different units of analysis (e.g., the categories of gender, occupation, and residence over time) are primary for multivariate paradigms but must be located in temporal context and interpreted as meaningful to actors in order to useful for other paradigms. Within an interpretive paradigm, the table is primary evidence for the ways in which bureaucratic institutions construct categories, such as gender, that shape thinking and perceptions. Within a historical paradigm, the table is primary evidence for the changing production of data by the state to be used to help form public policies on affirmative action, for example.⁴ Theoretical definitions thus constitute relevant evidence in different ways for the different paradigms, although they do not create the evidence. For one paradigm, a particular kind of evidence may be in the foreground, and background evidence is reinterpreted in order to become theoretically relevant.

HUMAN AGENCY

How can human agency be restored to theoretical constructions of social life? We know from the sociology of science that what we see in the physical world depends on what we are looking for, on the categories we bring to it. “Theorizing” is an activity, a conscious human process, but “evidence” (or data, or
Theories are clusters of factors that allow you to construct empirical "measures" of existence of democracy, or amount of housework done) are classified into separate categories. Some categories are concrete: worms or wilt, or gender. Some are abstract, as when we look at a census table on occupations and incomes and see either "social mobility" or "class inequality" or when a botanist sees different types of "striations."

When should you gather or create new evidence yourself? C. Wright Mills's injunction in The Sociological Imagination (1959) was to assess the potential benefits of possible lines of empirical inquiry before actually doing the research. Mills emphasized that empirical "excursions" are tempting because they seem to be a way of paving the path of inquiry, thus easing the way through the jungle of interpretations. But he also warned that concreteness can be illusory, since the path may lead nowhere. Piles of empirical findings accumulate along the way, but they may have little relevance to the theoretical destination. The reason a particular theory is chosen at the moment to explain the evidence has cultural and historical roots: professional fashion, political correctness, political incorrectness, tribal loyalties, and—last but, one hopes, not least—a belief that the evidence supports the theory.

With these preliminary observations about the general relationship between evidence and theories, I move on to the ways in which different paradigms construct theoretical claims and empirical generalizations.

FOREGROUND MULTIVARIATE ARGUMENTS

The sheer empirical power of multivariate descriptions of social structure and its changes gives this paradigm some of its fundamental importance as a cornerstone of modern social science. A foreground multivariate argument assumes that a society is composed of relatively autonomous subsystems (or "units of analysis"): individuals, communities, families, states, markets, organizations, ethnic groups, genders, international systems. The attributes of these units of analysis are described as "variables."

The multivariate aspect of a theoretical claim is the model of the measured and unmeasured factors believed to explain a particular social phenomenon. Theories are clusters of factors that allow you to construct empirical "measures" of the independent, dependent, intervening, and control variables that constitute the theory.

Variables (something that varies or differs, like gender, education, income, existence of democracy, or amount of housework done) are classified into several types. "Dependent" (or "response," or "outcome") variables are those that are to be explained by another variable. "Independent" (or explanatory, or causal) variables are those that, one’s theory argues, explain the dependent variable. If being male or female is correlated how much housework you do, or if the wealth of a country is associated with whether or not it is democratic, you can argue on the basis of a theory and an appropriate time order (the cause must precede the effect) that there is a valid relationship between the two variables. The empirical correlation, once again, does not itself establish causation; it provides only a basis for a theory of causal mechanisms that has empirical support or, even better, experimental controls.

"Intervening" variables theorize about the mechanisms that explain why the independent and dependent variables are related. Do men do less housework than women because of traditional sex roles or because women are exchanging their household services for economic support? Are richer countries more likely to be democratic than poorer countries because richer countries have better educated populations and better educated populations are more tolerant of political differences? Or do people in richer countries simply have more to lose from a dictatorship? Such "three-variable" hypotheses are the core explanatory model for a multivariate paradigm, regardless of how much the theory is elaborated by additional variables or by complex statistical models. Note that the inferences can be tested empirically. Do women who work and thus provide an equal share of financial support for the household do less housework? Do women with a feminist ideology do less housework? Do men with an egalitarian philosophy do more housework? For the other example, are better-educated persons indeed more tolerant of political differences than less-well-educated persons?

"Control" variables are those aspects of the societal environment that you attempt to "hold constant" or that specify the conditions under which the presumed relationship between independent and dependent variable holds. The relationship between gender and housework may be true only in modern societies where both men and women are free to sell or exchange their labor and also legally free to marry and divorce. The relationship between wealth and democracy may be found only in those societies in which political competition is limited to issues that do not challenge the rights of private property.

"Interaction effects" exist when the association of one variable ("X") to another ("Y") depends on (is correlated with) the value (or "state," or "condition") of a third variable ("Z"). Note how the seemingly neutral analytic language contains implicit assumptions about causality.

Once the variables are theoretically defined, the next step is the definition of empirical indicators, the development of measures, and the gathering of primary data or the analysis of secondary data. Data can be either quantitative or qualitative, although the language of the multivariate paradigm often presumes quantitative measures. At this point in the research process, the problems usually dealt with in "methods" courses arise: What population are you analyzing (white, middle-class households? all Western societies?). How do you construct an appropriate sample, or are you dealing with the universe of all cases? What are the reliability and the validity of the measures of housework (hours per day? observations) sounds like things, like entities that exist apart from human activity and social processes. A botanist literally "sees" different things in a leaf than a lay person. If we are interested in whether or not a plant needs water, we may only see the wilted leaves, not the tiny worms covering the leaves. The point is that there are many aspects to a concrete object, situation, or event, aspects that are grasped only by those with an active interest in some of those aspects. Particular aspects are singled out by categories. Some categories are concrete: worms or wilt, or gender. Some are abstract, as when we look at a census table on occupations and incomes and see either "social mobility" or "class inequality" or when a botanist sees different types of "striations."
Per week? Is cutting the lawn housework? Repairing windows?)? Is democracy best measured by the existence of a party system? Free speech? A free press? For how many years must they have existed before a society should be labelled “democratic”?

Technical issues of measurement are connected to your underlying theory of gender relations or of democracy. As you define empirical measures, you are simultaneously specifying the content of the theoretical concepts. Every concept in each question I have posed has both theoretical and empirical aspects. That is, the questions point “up” toward abstract bodies of related concepts and “down” toward relevant evidence of various kinds (itself located and defined by means of concepts).

The point can be illustrated by posing an empirical question: Is the relationship between the number of hours worked per week by women and by men inside and outside the home correlated with whether the husband or the wife (or both) work for pay? How is the relationship between gender and housework “affected by” (with no causal inference intended) the level of family income, education, and number of young children? The statistical tables showing the interrelationships of all of these variables may allow you to say something about power in intimate relationships or how family structures are related to the economy.

If the foreground standpoint is that of a search for multivariate relations, then symbolic meanings and historical processes tend to appear within a constrained multivariate rhetoric of explanation. That is, not only are the independent and dependent variables assumed to be objective and external (“social facts” in the Durkheimian sense), but cultural and symbolic meanings embodied in social interactions are regarded as objective, as another set of “factors” to be taken into account in constructing an explanation. Alternatively, sometimes subjective meanings are regarded as less important than material and measurable factors.

Multivariate paradigms treat different kinds of meanings very differently, depending on how close the meaning is to actual behavior. An entire literature exists on the problem of unmeasured but presumably correlated variables and problems of validity and reliability of measures. Much of this work analyzes such subjective variables as “prejudice,” “interests,” “values,” “aspirations,” “purposes,” or “perceptions” of almost anything. Because of the importance of measurement in this paradigm, there is pressure to develop replicable and comparable (by whatever criterion) empirical indicators of the theoretical variables.

The historical situations from which the data are generated may be seen either as “noise” (accidental circumstances that affect multivariate relations in random or irrelevant ways) or as a different kind of factor, to be taken into account in the research design as the “comparative context.” Historical processes may be seen as a way of looking at how the variables change over time (“time series analysis”), as exogenous factors that can be ignored, or simply as the theoretically irrelevant conditions under which the data were gathered. Historical situations can, after all, be described in terms of types and structures and compared with respect to their major characteristics. Those who construct theoretical claims about multivariate relations usually subsume historical processes under a theory of general explanatory mechanisms.

Concepts are assumed to designate a fixed meaning (as well as the chunk of reality to which it refers) for a particular community of analysts. The aspect of reality that the concept comes to represent becomes associated with the concept in a way that becomes socially accepted. What is perceived is then translated by the brain into the concept. You see an “apple” and immediately think the word. This is the “representational” (or “positivist”) aspect of a concept: Its meaning is found in its measures—the observations of the world that it represents. Those concepts that are not on the contested frontiers of social inquiry, those that form the unquestioned vocabulary of research practices, have this representative character, until some theoretical issue arises that calls this aspect of the concept into question.

The development of standardized and widely used measures is a decisive advance in a multivariate paradigm of inquiry. When measures of such concepts as GDP (Gross Domestic Product), or authoritarianism, or alienation, or democracy, become part of the established repertoire of concepts linked to empirical measures, a tool for inquiry has been created that is then available to the community of researchers. That community has come to accept a certain empirical indicator as adequately capturing the underlying theoretical concept. In the natural sciences, the equivalent is a consensus that a certain piece of equipment measures what it is supposed to measure (although case studies of natural science suggest how risky these assumptions are). A measure agreed upon by a community of social scientists reflects the outcome of long debates that have been temporarily concluded, allowing research to proceed on the basis of assumptions about stable connections among theories, methods, and evidence (i.e., an established paradigm).

Other examples within sociology are occupational prestige scores (based on surveys that ask respondents to rank a list of many occupations in order of prestige), SES (or socioeconomic status, based on questions about income, education, and occupation), segregation indexes for cities (based on measures of the numbers of census tracts with particular proportions of whites and non-whites). An even better example from psychology is IQ, still retaining its hold on testing and popular belief despite severe criticism from scholars who have demonstrated that “intelligence” comprises different and quite unrelated capacities. That such measures have been rightly criticized is irrelevant to my point that institutional mechanisms exist to establish and sustain empirical measures.

The generic empirical question for the multivariate paradigm is “Does X regularly occur with Y?” where X and Y are any activity, event or, behavior that varies. The generic theoretical question is “Is this relationship explanatory?” Or, “What are the antecedent, intervening, and consequent [feedback] mechanisms that produce and sustain the relationship between X and Y?”
FOREGROUND INTERPRETIVE ARGUMENTS

Interpretive arguments are constructed from theories about social interactions that become symbolically meaningful for human actors. Such arguments were dominant in the old “Chicago school” of urban ethnography and community studies, and they remain central to the “symbolic interaction” and “social construction” traditions in sociology and cultural anthropology. Such foreground arguments combine an empirical focus on the language and gestures of human interactions with a theoretical concern with their symbolic meanings and how the ongoing social order is negotiated and maintained.

Other kinds of arguments within this paradigm focus on ideologies, discourses, and cultural frameworks. A combination of theoretical assumptions about the social construction of meaning and empirical evidence drawn from ethnographic field work or participant observation is the normal raw material for an interpretive argument. Other kinds of evidence, including texts, surveys, documents, interviews, and even experiments, can be used to construct the symbolic meanings of social worlds or the cultural significance of discourse or ideology.

In many interpretive arguments the reader is shown the world of the actors so that he can understand their life “from within.” When you read W. F. Whyte’s Street Corner Society, you are with Doc and his companions on the streets of the city, fighting with the police, dealing with the social workers. When you read any of the older classics of the Chicago school of sociology, such as The Hobo, The Taxi Dance Girl, The Ghetto, and The Gold Coast and the Slums, you experience new social worlds. Erving Goffman’s The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, on Scottish crofters, and William Kornblum’s Blue Collar Community, which focuses on steel workers at work and home in South Chicago, are more recent additions to that genre. Arlie Hochschild’s The Second Shift (1989) tells the story (see Chapter 5) of how twelve different couples negotiate the balance among work, housework, and child care. Hochschild provides “thick” descriptions of each family and also presents in an appendix (as background data) the statistical studies that estimate the actual numbers of hours done by men and women in different family situations. The reader shares vicariously in the lives of the individuals and groups depicted in vivid detail.

Arguments within an interpretive paradigm explain by reconstructing the social processes of interaction that constitute the detailed texture of social life. It was not necessary for the Protestants feverishly accumulating capital to be aware of the consequences of their actions for Weber’s interpretation of the meaning and consequences of their behavior to have analytic cogency. Goffman, to take another example, wants to “isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject” (Frame Analysis, p. 10). That is, he wants to show the difference between perceiving “what is going on here” in a straightforward manner (a conversa-

tion, a lecture, a circus, a holiday) and perceiving it as a joke, a dream, an accident, a mistake, a deception, a misunderstanding, or a performance.

All these aspects of human experience can be interpreted from an identical stream of reported events. The methodological issue is how the observer can know whether “what is going on” is a dream, a joke, or a “real” conversation. (At the postmodern extreme, the difference is either irrelevant or nonexistent.)

In another book, Goffman explores the “individual’s capacity to acquire, reveal and conceal information” (Strategic Interaction, p. 4). Thus, “theory” is used not only to reveal what actors think is going on but also shows what they think matters in understanding how society functions. Whatever happens at higher levels of conceptual aggregation (“the family,” “government,” “corporations”) cannot be divorced from these basic interpersonal strategies for making sense of the world. Failing to make these links reifies social constructions.

Foreground interpretive arguments may take into account both multivariate relations and historical processes but reinterpret them. By taking on the actors’ perspective, the researchers assume that the actors have an understanding of the factors affecting their actions, whether personal conflicts, economic interests, or the possibility of arrest. Understandings (how actors “define the situation”) of such factors influencing action are often partial, but they are nonetheless what actors take into account in their decisions to take a course of action. Actors, of course, differ considerably in their understanding of what constrains their actions. And actors may also take into account the historical context—the antecedent circumstances, the past motives and beliefs of other actors and their understandings. Historical processes tend to be foreshortened in interpretive arguments, however, reduced to their impact on the consciousness of contemporary actors.

The definition of the situation does not, however, override the actual situation out there. As Goffman puts it, “Defining the situation as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute only marginally to the events in progress; in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly. All the world is not a stage . . . .” (Frame Analysis, p. 1). People construct their conceptions of reality within a community of meaning constituted through interaction.

Thus, interpretive arguments include those that attempt to get at meanings that are “beneath” or “beyond” the consciousness of actors. Language and a wide variety of texts carry cultural associations and meanings that actors as users of symbols are not fully aware of. Language, in particular, obviously cannot be reduced to interactions among individuals and how they negotiate communication. Institutions are thus not outside the process of social construction of meaning but are vital elements in the social processes that constrain and shape meanings. Although the constraints and the particular historical situation in which they exist may be external “forces” from the standpoint
of human actors, they are also the target of time-consuming and costly strategic estimation. Cognitive "shortcuts" develop that Pierre Bourdieu has called a "habitus." They operate in scientific inquiry, as well as in every other human activity.

Within the interpretive paradigm, theoretical claims are viewed as the language used by members of a scientific community to share ideas about a social situation being investigated, the conceptual constructions that explain "what is going on here," since theory is constituted by the general ideas that people use to communicate with each other. Partly because of this view of theory, interpretive paradigms are likely to be presented in more personal terms, taking the theorist herself into account as part of the presentation of the argument.

The symbols used by the community or the social world being studied constitute part of the language being interpreted, and the "translation" from one language to another is always problematic. Concepts are negotiated in their actual usages in the process of communication between any set of social actors, including scientific observers.

The theoretical assumptions of ethnographic descriptions are frequently left implicit, as, for example, in W. F. Whyte's Street Corner Society (1943) or Elliott Liebow's Tally's Corner (1967). The rich descriptions of white and black street corner life contain many assumptions about the conditions under which friendship, loyalty, personal conflict, and family responsibility develop and can be sustained. Traditional anthropology assumed a stance of scientific objectivity, in works by Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict, among many others. Interpretations of observations of other cultures were made as if the observer were a neutral and objective presence. The presuppositions of such anthropology have been exposed as social constructions by the new critical anthropology. On the cover of James Clifford and George Marcus's collection, Writing Culture (1986), there is a picture of an anthropologist sitting in the doorway of a hut writing something (presumably his field notes), while a native is silently watching him from behind. The Western, white anthropologist is seen as actively constructing an image of "primitive" culture, while—in the published report—maintaining an aura of objectivity and neutrality.

Regarding the interpretive paradigm as the only possible one assumes that the world can be understood only through the symbolic meanings of action and their continuous renegotiation in the situations in which individuals interact. History has no meaning except insofar as it is represented in the cultural significance of ongoing interactions. Causation is found only in the intentions and the perceptions of actors about the consequences of action.

The generic empirical question is "What did (any human behavior, experience, activity) mean to the participants?" The generic theoretical question is "How can we understand and explain those meanings?" or, more elaborate, "How do the actors' understandings and interpretations of what goes on in social interactions be shown to constitute cultural identities or social worlds?" The answers to such questions do not necessarily entail appeals to objective external causes outside the cultural symbols available to both the actor and those doing the interpreting of action.

FOREGROUND HISTORICAL ARGUMENTS

Historical arguments analyze specific historical processes that explain a sequence of contingent events occurring at specific times and in named places. Such arguments combine an empirical focus on events located in specific times and places ("conjunctures") with theoretical inferences about the situational context and the entities (sometimes called the "totality") within which the events have significance. The typical evidence for historical arguments is drawn from texts, documents, and artifacts from the past. Historical arguments constitute a distinctive paradigm only in the field of "history," partly because of the arbitrary separation of that discipline from the other social sciences.

Certain sequences of events are dramatic and well known, even momentous, yet do not readily lend themselves to multivariate analysis—the French Revolution of 1789, the American Revolution of 1776, the American Civil War of 1861–1865, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the trial of O. J. Simpson in 1995, and the "sixties," to pick only a few. Attempts to reconceptualize these unique sequences of events as instances of a general class of phenomena ("revolutions," "regime transformations," "criminal trials," "cultural movements") in order to be able to classify their attributes as "variables" and thus incorporate them into multivariate arguments may miss their essential features and their unique social consequences. Systematic statements of empirical covariation are of course important, but they do not replace a complex description and explanation of a particular historical totality.

The appeal of a historical paradigm is seen in such examples as Robert Caro's The Power Broker, a narrative of the life of Robert Moses, the "master builder" of New York City's bridges, parks, and playgrounds and a consummate politician and bureaucratic entrepreneur. Taylor Branch's Parting the Waters tells the story of Martin Luther King's progress from a boy in a small Southern town to a public symbol of the black liberation movement of the 1960s. David Halberstam's The Best and the Brightest is the tale of what happened to some of the men and women who served in two Washington administrations.

In all these books, there is a red thread of narrative—events are located in time and space, particular people are named and act, around a unifying theme: New York city and state politics, the civil rights movement, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Although the texture of a social world may be evoked (Tammany Hall, a black Southern church, the Democratic Party in the South, the political circles around Lyndon Johnson), the core purpose of the narrative is not to convey the essential qualities of a social world. Nor is the purpose to develop generalizations about the conditions under which electoral coalitions, bureaucratic entrepreneurship, elite ruptures, religious movements, or effective organizational decision making occur. Every historical narrative pre-
supposes some knowledge about and makes assumptions about social structures and the conditions under which certain events are likely, but such abstract generalizations are not the goal of the argument. None of these works (like many others that might be mentioned) is "purely" or "only" a description of sequences of events, but the narrative is in the foreground.

The analysis of such events, as practiced by either "historical sociology" or "social history" (the disciplinary boundaries are both institutionally significant and intellectually relevant) combines a search for systematic patterns and an understanding of how contingent and converging events create different outcomes or make alternative scenarios plausible. For example, suppose the research question is: Did the Soviet Union disappear in December 1991 because of internal economic crisis, military pressure from the United States, conflict within the Communist Party, or growing political dissent? As phrased, that question could be either a multivariate or a historical one. A historical answer would look for the complex interrelationships of each "factor," seen as summarizing a distinctive set of events in time and place. "Economic crisis," for example, might be indicated by massive public debt at all levels of government, by dropping productivity in major industrial sectors, by ever lower standards of living. Inferring that such a factor was a factor in the disappearance of the Soviet Union presupposes the conclusions of comparative studies of "similar" events, but in important respects there are no similar events. Although this is the apparent paradox of a historical paradigm, the opposite is true of multivariate argument: It ignores the distinctive features of each case from which data are generalized.

For a multivariate analysis of this case, you would have to find "comparable" cases of regime changes, governmental transformations, or system crises. Note that each of these labels frames the disappearance of the Soviet Union in different theoretical terms, and might lead to a different selection of "comparable" events.

To take another example, you might argue that the sequence of unique events that preceded the French Revolution and that traditionally are regarded as "causes" of the Revolution (the fall of the Bastille, for example) were largely irrelevant to the outcome, because the events that led to the political and economic crisis started decades before the Revolution. Those factors (or "processes") could be summarized as a complex combination of a tax-exempt nobility, declining agricultural productivity, the growing cost of war, chaotic political leadership, and a disaffected populace.

Sequences of events can thus be theorized as processes that happen simultaneously and converge at given historical moments. The convergence of separate processes is contingent, and not predictable, but each process is potentially explainable by itself. That is, economic crisis, a peasant rebellion, elite disaffection, and an emerging social movement can be thought of as simultaneous but relatively autonomous processes that happened to converge in 1789 in France. Each of these "processes" could be regarded as a set of "variables," if converted to a multivariate argument. The foreground concern is to integrate all of these processes into a complex narrative. In a crucial sense, "measuring" an event or process as if it were separable from its historical context denies the essential "historicity" of the phenomenon.

Within historical arguments, theoretical claims are seen as historically developed concepts used to produce social knowledge under certain conditions. If you are committed to historical explanations and thus use the language of contingency, situations, circumstances, or conjunctures, you are more likely to accept the importance of the interaction of multiple processes that combine to explain a specific outcome. Such a combination may or may not be unique to the particular time and place. And you are likely to assume that their symbolic meanings to the actors will be found embedded in your narrative of the important events that together lead to the outcome.

How unique are historical events? All evidence is ultimately "unique," in the sense that at the most concrete level it is based on records or observations of time- and place-specific actions of human beings from which we generalize and abstract. The concept of "economic development," for example, is a very abstract generalization from the actual activities of human beings working, producing, saving, buying, investing, trading, and so on, aggregated as a characteristic of all the persons living in a given territory. The data from which a number called the "1991 Gross Domestic Product of the United States" is calculated are all ultimately derived from the concrete activities of millions of human beings. Similarly, there is no such thing as "war," "capitalism," "the state," or "revolution." Human beings do many different things: kill each other, produce goods for sale, write proclamations, march with each other. Almost every general concept can be reduced to the individual level.12

In this primordial sense, we all must be "methodological individuals." Human activities in specific times and places—recorded, told, leaving residual traces—are the only evidence we have to answer any research question. All social processes, events, and historical systems are thus unique. World capitalism, the War on Poverty, the Holocaust, the Second World War, the election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa: Each in some respects is "one of a kind." But also unique is the meal you had at McDonald's last night, the fight with your wife or boyfriend last week, or the house you lived in as a child. Analogies can be drawn with other "similar" events, of course, and the very categories ("capitalism," "war," "election," "restaurant," "intimate relationship") used to characterize these events assume that similar processes exist. Comparisons in order to make historical arguments are therefore inevitably approximate. We can certainly deploy plausible arguments about the causes of unique historical events, but they cannot be reduced to linear multivariate measures without losing the substantive richness of the historical phenomenon.

Like narrative history, historical sociology is concerned with describing and analyzing temporality and events. But it also seeks to explain outcomes generated by the interplay among social structures, social processes, and contingent, unpredictable events. Unlike narrative history, moreover, historical sociology tries to provide meaningful theoretical explanations for the temporal patterns, continuities, and ruptures discovered in human history over the long term.
The generic empirical question when constructing a foreground historical argument is, most succinctly, "What happened, there and then?" or "What were the significant events, X, Y, and Z? To whom, where, and when did they occur, and in what sequence?" The generic theoretical question is "What explains what happened?" or "What were the circumstances, the processes, or the situations that provide the explanatory contexts for these events?"

In conventional historiography, the goal is to construct a narrative of events selected for their significance with respect to one hypothetical explanation of "what happened." Although evidence is usually derived from historical texts, documents, and other records, the kinds of evidence usually central to other paradigms (surveys or field notes, for example) can be analyzed as texts that document contingent events and processes within a historical context.

Although contemporary historical arguments lack the distinctive philosophical foundations of the other two paradigms, it is still practiced as an operating paradigm. For, unlike the multivariate and the interpretive paradigms, whose research is grounded in the philosophical traditions of logical positivism and phenomenology respectively, historical arguments are produced without an underlying theory of knowledge (i.e., epistemology). 13

As practiced, historical sociology and social history are adrift from their former moorings in the philosophy of history. History seems more diversely grounded epistemologically, at least as compared to the other two paradigms. That historical sociology lacks a common epistemology and methodology is confirmed by the variety of methodologies contained in Theda Skocpol’s anthology of influential historical sociologists. 14 There you encounter interpretive and positivist-multivariate approaches as well as holism, evolutionaryism, structuralism, and developmentalism. While the remnants of an integrated philosophy of history are evident, even influential on some of the historical sociologists evaluated there, one searches in vain for a unifying epistemological basis for the practice of historical sociology.

What happened to the philosophy of history once so prominent in historical discourse? As a body of theory, the philosophy of history originated as an intellectual project of Enlightenment philosophers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a project that attempted to discover in the social world the same systemic laws that they believed were being discovered about the natural world. Philosophers like Vico (1668–1744), Kant (1724–1804), Herder (1744–1803), Condorcet (1743–1794), and Hegel (1770–1831) provided comprehensive accounts of human history couched in the metaphysical and speculative language of laws and inevitable progress. 15 Typically, either linear or cyclical patterns of historical progress toward a valued end point were explained by the unfolding of teleological final causes or immanent forces such as the Deity, reason, natural law, or evolution.

Historical sociology’s commitment to macrosociological concepts, units, and processes reflects the early modern European project of nation-state formation. The preferred units of analysis (the subjects of historical change and the objects of inquiry) were peoples, nations, and civilizations. The cyclical and/or linear movements of civilizations occurred through distinct stages of change in such a way that the rise and decline of peoples and nations could be compared according their position on a continuum of progress toward some ideal end. Hegel, for example, argued that history was a rational process whereby the absolute spirit (reason) expressed as an idea of freedom manifested itself in distinct historical stages: Oriental, Greek, Roman, and, finally, Germanic civilization. Further, the progressive realization of this historical evolution was manifested in the national state.

In the nineteenth century, such metaphysical philosophies of history were rejected in favor of positivist science (August Comte) and Darwinian theories of social evolution. Though theories of social evolution were rejected by Weber, they influenced Marx’s dialectical theory of capitalist development and, later, Talcott Parsons’s neo-evolutionary theory of structural differentiation and functional integration. What all of these philosophies of history share is the assumption that historical processes are moving toward a final end, one defined by the beliefs or ideologies of the contemporary author, looking backward.

To return to the lacunae in the historical paradigm, the theories and methods of modern science have devastated the metaphysical reasoning underlying the philosophy of history’s search for an all-embracing explanation for historical change or for the “stages” of historical development. To be sure, because ideas of the past influence the minds of the living, elements of the various philosophies of history do influence historical sociological inquiry. Indeed, communities of scholars are researching “puzzles” defined by the Enlightenment theory of progress, Marxism’s dialectical materialism and many forms of social evolutionism. But historical sociology still lacks a distinct epistemology, comparable to positivism and phenomenology, that can ground its theoretical claims.

However, the rejection of teleological historicism does not indicate the failure of a historical paradigm as a set of research practices. If anything, the seemingly more solid epistemological foundations for multivariate and interpretive arguments can become—particularly for the former—a dead weight, making it difficult to recognize dynamic, changing aspects of social life. Despite their contradictory or absent epistemological foundations, works with foreground historical arguments are being continually produced.

THE DIVORCE OF THEORY FROM EVIDENCE

As may be clear by now, I am limiting my discussion to those practitioners who make explicitly problematic the relationship of theory and evidence. “Abstracted empiricism” and “abstracted theoreticism” are not my concern here. Each paradigm has its version of this division.

Within a multivariate paradigm, theory divorced from evidence becomes abstract “systems” theory or “structural functionalism,” specifying the “requirements” for the functioning of a social system. The theorist Talcott Par-
sons is the best exemplar of this intellectual tendency. Evidence divorced from theory becomes what C. Wright Mills called "abstract empiricism" or, in the contemporary dismissal, mere "number crunching." "Theory" is reduced to statements of the relationships between empirical indicators.

Theory divorced from evidence within the interpretive paradigm (i.e., without references to concrete experiences of human beings in interaction or to cultural themes and symbols) is found in phenomenological philosophy (e.g., the works of Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or George Herbert Mead). In more contemporary versions, it is found in postmodern discourse analysis and deconstruction, where the world disappears into texts. Evidence divorced from theory is a descriptive statement of a social world, social situation, or social interaction, in the words of the actors.

When evidence on a sequence of events is divorced from a theoretical claim, a historical argument becomes a description of unique events: people, places, actions. Narrative historiography is the self-conscious method of this theory, privileging the sequences of actions of individuals in specific times and places, but not attempting to theorize or explain them abstractly. Extreme historicism of this kind is no longer a legitimate contemporary practice of scholars.

Theory divorced from evidence in a historical argument is a version of "structuralism." Laws of social development are postulated, and individuals become the "bearers" or agents of historical forces. Conjunctures are contained within and can be predicted by the convergence of multiple historical forces that in principle can be known. The contingent and open-ended possibility of change and historically new social forms is denied. Subjective meanings are seen as the bias of the observer. Causation is embedded in the historical forces that over-determine the outcome of events. This structuralist view of history is also obsolete.

CONCLUSIONS

Three possible ways of combining theoretical claims and empirical generalizations from various kinds of evidence in answering research questions have been labeled paradigms of inquiry. Multivariate, interpretive, and historical paradigms can be in the foreground or in the background of a particular work. Since every empirical generalization simultaneously is located within a historical context, implies multivariate relations, and is suffused with symbolic meanings, the three paradigms are mutually dependent. Each paradigm presupposes, and in some sense is dependent on, the others. Table 1 gives the working vocabulary of the three paradigms.

It must be emphasized once again that these are pragmatic distinctions. Sometimes a field study develops some hypotheses that can be tested by means of systematic samples of individuals or organizations. Conversely, some data (e.g., census data on the relationship between divorce rates and marriage type) can be given qualitative significance and insight by life histories and ethnographies of particular families. Histories of particular groups, events, or societies can sometimes be systematically compared, with historical attributes reduced to variables.

More generally, multivariate models have the appearance of externality (in Durkheim's sense of a "social fact") and of objectivity. They seem to be, in the particular form such abstractions take, external forces that act upon individuals. "Variables" presuppose human capacities to extract meaning and calculate courses of action and are abstracted from the historical particularity of each situation.

An ethnographic account of the symbolic meanings of an interaction presupposes assumptions about the historical context in which those interactions occur and also a set of structural factors that shaped and defined the circumstances under which the interaction occurred.

Finally, a narrative of historical events presupposes a comparison that provides an implicit theoretical rationale for the construction of the particular narrative account. A historical narrative also presupposes symbolic interconnections between the individuals participating and "constructing" that event.

An explicit "foreground" argument of one kind thus presupposes assumptions about arguments (both theoretical claims and empirical generalizations) about the other kinds. The difference between a foreground multivariate argument and others can be summarized as follows. The former seeks variations within a system of interrelated variables. The unit of analysis and the variables must be assumed not to change during the period of measurement, and they
must be free of time and place in order to exhibit the power of abstraction. That is, “liberalism-conservatism” (for example) must be assumed to retain the same meaning across all individual measures as a concept and construct, but it can vary among them. In a foreground interpretive argument, the meaning of a political attitude such as “liberalism” is constantly being renegotiated in the course of social action. Foreground historical arguments add the time dimension—the meanings change over time, as structural arrangements are transformed.

The analytic distinctions I have offered should not mislead you about how imprecise and intuitive the “methods” for moving from theoretical concept to empirical evidence are, particularly in the construction of multivariate arguments, which claim the most scientific generality. There are no rules for agreeing on the relationship between concept and empirical indicator. How “far” from a concept should an indicator be? When concepts and indicators are “too close” (as when “age” is indicated by the number of years one has lived, or “gender” by whether one is a male or a female), there is no significant difference between concept and indicator.

There is also the persistent problem of tautology. What is a “democracy”? Is it a political system that has elections, competitive political parties, and freedom of the press (among other things)? How do we know that elections, and the other practices are features of a democracy? Because they are part of the definition of democracy. Here the concept is not validated by the empirical test, because the theoretical concept (“democracy”) and the indicators (e.g., elections) are identical.

The relevant point is, once again, that the three paradigms are different in their rhetorical claims and ways of marshaling different kinds of evidence, but they also are intrinsically related to each other. In the example of democracy, there is no way out of the tautology (except to say arbitrarily, “This is what I mean by democracy right now”) except by recognizing the contextualized (i.e., historical) meanings of the term and its indicators while also appealing to a community of analysts who accept the appropriateness of those meanings.

There is no reason to make a decision about these alternative paradigms a priori. In the spirit of methodological and theoretical pluralism, you should entertain all of these paradigms as potentially useful components of a general explanation of a social phenomenon. Being aware of how your theoretical and empirical choices fall into one or another paradigm of inquiry does not help answer your substantive theoretical and empirical questions, but it may sensitize you to a wider range of choices, regardless of the content of the research question. This approach may help you reformulate your research questions, self-consciously locating them within foreground or background paradigms of inquiry.

In distinguishing different arguments, the three aspects of social life should not be regarded as potentially separate “causes.” That is, historical processes, symbolic meanings, and multivariate relations are not alternative explanations of the same phenomenon. Rather, they are combinations of theoretical claims and empirical generalizations that flow from research questions that abstract from the social phenomena of interest in very different ways.

In Chapter 4, I present exemplary foreground arguments within the multivariate paradigm to show concretely how theoretical and empirical research questions have been raised in several classic and contemporary texts.