

On the Presence of Laws in History

A Praxeological Approach to Sociological Generalizations

Wesley Gaines

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Abstract

Attempting a cross-disciplinary approach that applies economic and sociological theory to the discipline of history, this paper pushes back against a wealth of deterministic models of history by proposing a methodology which is fairly novel to most historians but less so to most economists: Praxeological history. This model is one in which the rational actor is the driving force in history rather than material forces as proposed by Marx and others or an inevitable end as proposed by progressives. This paper interacts with the New History of Things and Environmental History movements, attempting to establish the human and his nature as the proper subject of history.

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This paper enters into a long and arduous debate in the social sciences, largely between sociologists and historians. The issue arises within the discipline of history because the historical record is always incomplete. One common solution to surmounting these gaps in our historical knowledge is to invent generalizations or laws that we assume humans always operate under so that we can infer their actions in the absence of information. Better put by the infamous historical sociologist Rodney Stark: “the point of sociological generalizations ... is to rise above the need to plead ignorance pending adequate evidence.”¹ Stark treats these sociological laws that he identifies, as equally irrefutable as the laws of physics, prompting him to make bold statements such as “of course it wasn’t; cult movements never are” concerning the nature of the rise of Christianity.² Historians typically react to this type of generalization with a series of questions: do humans have the same motives throughout time and across different cultures? Are we ourselves not the ones who invent the laws that we identify? Do we project our own subjectivities and cultural values onto the past by assuming the motives and actions of others? Is human nature constant? One such traditional historian, Ramsey MacMullen admits that “the explicit record at important points fits badly with what are, to ourselves, entirely natural expectations...” but that “we must, of course, favor the former.”³ Therefore, history seems to favor the records while social scientific methods of historical study favor the generalizations, creating a key tension between historical data and laws based on rational assumptions or what seems plausible to us. Historians have created models to address this tension, sometimes identifying only a few laws or constants in history, or implementing partial sociological models.

¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 46.

² Stark, 47.

³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale, 1986), 42.

This solution of making laws and assumptions strikes me as problematic for several reasons. First, at its heart, history's subject is human beings. Marc Bloch said as much in 1944, claiming in the introduction to his classic work *The Historian's Craft* that "the good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies."⁴ While practitioners of "natural history" would disagree, contrasting their discipline with "human history," natural historians must confront the question of whether or not they would have any field to study without the presence and activity of human actors. Although natural history may claim to be distinct from human history, does it not merely study human interaction with the environment? Maza credits Fredrick Jackson Turner with originating the school of environmental history, an early form of natural history, but his work does not simply examine the environment, as does biology, or the changing of the natural environment over time as does geology. Rather, his work examines the exploitation of the environment by "intrepid settlement... [and] man's destructive impact on nature... [as well as] the efforts of early conservationists like John Muir and Aldo Leopold."⁵ Even Timothy Winegard's new book *The Mosquito*, while examining a non-human actor, still claims to fundamentally examine that actor's impact on the course of human events. In the book's own subtitle, *A Human History of our Deadliest Predator*, the book's status as a work of human history is evident. The "new history of things" movement, practiced by Marcy Norton, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and others also attempts to shift the historical discipline away from the human actor, but merely provides another angle from which to view the action of humans by studying objects created by humans and deriving their value and significance to history through being used by humans. Without humans, the discipline of history would consist of nothing more than measuring the passing of time on an

⁴ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage, 1953), 26.

⁵ Sara Maza, *Thinking About History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 109.

empty and uneventful world. But human beings are always difficult to quantify. An astute historian would be skeptical at best about making untested generalizations about human behavior in the past, let alone laws, because humans are unquantifiable and irreducibly complex.

Assuming humans operate according to strict laws feels too deterministic, and limits the role of the individual in history, ascribing more power to the laws than to the choices of human actors.

However, there must be some constants in our historical study, otherwise no meaningful comparisons can be drawn between time periods; no inferences can be made, eliminating the possibility of historical inference when the record is incomplete. While I reject the legitimacy of methods which attribute modern causes of events to phenomena of the past without further evidence, as Stark and others are wont to do, I also reject models that consider all time periods to be isolated from one another. Assuming that all historical time periods are isolated seems unreasonable, as even a cursory glance at two societies in two different eras shows that the past clearly exerts influence on the present. So, the question remains, to what extent are laws present in history?

I agree with William H. Sewell, who expressed in his book *Logics of History*, that the “historians’ distinctive contribution to the social sciences is their analysis of how human action unfolds over time.”⁶ Under this model of historical study, one realizes the problem with viewing time periods as isolated from one another. It prevents conclusions that the historian can derive about human action and by extension, human nature. Rather, there must be an identifiable constant in order to enable an analysis of human action throughout time. If there is not, and each culture and epoch are truly distinct, unique, and exist in isolation from all other times, then our

⁶ Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.

cause and effect structure is disrupted. A cause of a given effect in one era of the past cannot be assumed to have a similar effect in a different era, effectively undermining the discipline of history and all social science. But as many prominent historians have emphasized, the past is foreign and alien to us. What can we point to that remains constant throughout time to enable analysis?

As proposed by Sewell, history analyzes human action throughout time. The one constant then within human history is our human nature. Our nature is the dual one with which we are created. God created man with the *imago dei*, making us in His image, giving us a nature distinct from the rest of creation. The subsequent fall caused us to acquire a sin nature. This dual nature of man, sometimes described as human dignity and depravity, defines all of human action, and has done so since the first man. While all social sciences seem to study something of the sort from slightly different perspectives and often with wildly different methodologies, I hope that I can avoid any accusations of being a sociologist or psychologist by claiming that the historian's role is to analyze human nature. Perhaps an analogy will better illustrate how history fundamentally studies human nature across time. Let us imagine history as a vast and wide tapestry, stretching as far as the eye can see to the left of the viewer upon the wall on which it is hung, with each culture and era of history displayed upon the tapestry in infinitely detailed and varied patterns, depicted scenes, and vibrantly diverse colors. There is however, one thread woven into this tapestry, and it seems to be the only thread which stretches seamless, unbreaking, throughout the entire tapestry, all the way to the beginning, maintaining its color and material composition throughout. This thread is human nature, and the historian can tug on it, following it back into the past as a lifeline in the otherwise overwhelming and alien sea of history. This, in fact, is the role of the historian.

It is reasonable to assume that humans always act in accordance with their nature. Acting outside of one's nature, or in violation to it is conceptually impossible, as philosophy has aptly demonstrated. Human nature, then, appears to be an unchanging constant that all of human action falls under. But how does this knowledge benefit our historical study? Are there identifiable laws within human nature that allow us to interpret historical data?

Two such laws which have been oft proposed are that humans act, and that humans are rational beings. These two ideas come together to form a concept termed rational choice theory, appropriated from economics into both history and sociology.⁷ The theory contains four assumptions: “(1) people are rational, (2) people act individually, (3) all collectives ultimately can be studied in terms of the individuals that make up the collective, and (4) individuals are utility maximizers.”⁸ These assumptions are based on the biblical evidence that humans are rational beings. In Isaiah 55:8-10 God tells us that His thoughts are not our thoughts, demonstrating that both God and man think. In Isaiah 1:18 the Lord says “come now, let us reason together,” demonstrating that both God and man have the capacity to reason. Through these and other verses, “God reveals to us that He is a rational being.”⁹ Being created in His image, humans share this attribute, and it is precisely this capacity to reason that sets us apart as distinct from the rest of creation. Therefore, we have identified a trait of human nature which

⁷ I recognize that the term rational choice theory has different connotations and implications across the many disciplines in which it is used. To a sociologist the term may mean something different than to a historian. I acknowledge that to a Neoclassical economist the term implies economic agents who engage in near instant calculation of utility. To a Misesian economist the term may be substituted simply for human action. I have opted to use the term in favor of the broader “human action” for the benefit of my historian colleagues for whom this paper was written, as it addresses an issue primarily found in the practice of history. Historians by and large are familiar with the term, and I provide what is, for my purposes at least, a sufficient definition written by the historian Norman J. Wilson.

⁸ Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis?: Recent Directions in Historiography*. 2nd ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2014), 106.

⁹ Shawn Ritenour, *Foundations of Economics a Christian View* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 11.

serves to explain or at least provide an analytical framework for human action, both present and historical, that humans act rationally. Additionally, if a historian accepts all the presuppositions of rational choice theory, then they believe humans act as individuals by rationally trying to attain their goals of maximizing personal interests. These principals allow the historian to analyze groups as well, because social organizations and society itself are comprised of rational acting individuals.

Fortunately, there is a philosophy of history which embraces rational choice theory. This model is called Praxeological History, and it holds at its core one law of human nature: humans act rationally. Rationality in this context merely means that “people are rational and therefore able to order their preferences to achieve as many of their high priorities as possible because they will behave in a rational manner.”¹⁰ Humans think and plan, just as God is thinking and planning being, in order to attain their desired ends. This principle carries significant implications for the discipline of history. First, it establishes individual humans as the principle actors in history. This principle alone flies in the face of deterministic models, which make up the majority of historical methods. With humans as the actors causing historical changes and events, history is driven, forward or backward, by their actions, not by material forces as Marx proposed or toward an inevitable superior destination as the progressives suggest. Praxeological history grants agency to the individual as the agent of historical change, rather than deterministic forces.

Praxeological history states that humans act individually, rationally, and toward achieving their goal of maximizing personal interests, termed self-interest by the economist Adam Smith. This implies that the historian can in fact make assumptions about past human

¹⁰ Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis?: Recent Directions in Historiography*. 2nd ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2014), 106.

behavior based on a law to fill in gaps in the historical record. The law of praxeological history can be used to assume that in any society or culture humans all act and act rationally, regardless of the time period. However, it can be used to assume further that humans act in the pursuit of their own self-interest regardless of time period or cultural norms. This view of human actors driving history forward is perhaps most in line with the new cultural history of Robert Darnton, E.P. Thompson, Carlo Ginzburg, and others which also grant agency to the individual. In their view it is the individual pursuing his desires that shapes the culture. In *Human Action*, Ludwig Von Mises makes a similar claim, asserting that in any society it is the individual that does the thinking. “Society does not think any more than it eats or drinks....There is joint action, but no joint thinking.”¹¹ However, as individuals in a society articulate their individual ideas through language, these ideas come together to form worldviews and traditions that create culture, making language “a tool of social action.”¹² Viewing society and therefore culture this way, as a product of individual human action, allows us to use praxeological history to study cultures through our analysis of the individual as the rational actor driving history. This common theme of rational action unites otherwise seemingly isolated historical epochs, lending a coherency to history and making historical study feasible.

However, this brings us back to our key problem: is it wise or viable to make assumptions about human behavior in the past based on laws that we discovered, or worse, invented ourselves? The essential distinction between praxeological history’s law and radical sociological generalizations by the likes of Rodney Stark and countless historians is that praxeology’s law is more limited in its application. Historical sociology has a tendency to project

¹¹Ludwig Von Mises, *Human Action*. (Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Fund, 2007), 177.

¹² Mises, 177.

our own modern cultural values onto humans of the past by assuming that they act in the same ways and for the same reasons that we do to cause similar historical events. The laws that it identifies in human behavior and group behavior are too arbitrary and specific. Praxeological history asserts that all humans, across all time periods, act in the rational pursuit of their own self-interest. However, it leaves the desires or personal interests of the individuals up to the historical actors: individuals. Rather than assuming that first century Greco-Roman Christians converted for the same reasons as modern day Moonie cults, as the sociologist Rodney Stark does, in his work *The Rise of Christianity*, praxeological history allows for the individuals of the past to make choices based on what they themselves valued, which can be determined by their unique cultural and temporal situation. Praxeology only states that all humans value their own self-interest and act rationally to achieve it. It does not state, as many historians wrongly assume, that humans most value material or monetary gain and act rationally to achieve it. Rather, the exact definition of what is in their own self-interest, is left up to the individual. His worldview may cause the historical actor to value honor or other non-material concepts over monetary gain. The values of the individual must be determined by the historian through an analysis of historical and cultural context in order to make inferences of human behavior in the absence of evidence.

Additionally, using modern motives to explain the behavior of people in the past based on the assumption that all humans act the same only has merit when there is both modern and historical evidence for the assumption. If Stark makes the claim that the early church must have risen a certain way because modern cult movements do, he must support this claim with both modern evidence (Moonies and Mormons), as well as ancient evidence, otherwise it is merely an assumption. The vast array of determinist historians, including the two largest groups, Marxists and progressives, must do the same, substantiating their assumptions about human behavior in

the past with actual evidence of humans acting in accordance with their theory in both the past and the present. Fortunately, there is ample evidence on the side of praxeological history's one law. It is significantly easier to provide evidence for such a law as basic as humans act rationally to achieve their own personal interest than it is to substantiate specific laws with ancient evidence. Laws of human action always need ample ancient and modern evidence to prove that they are indeed constant throughout time, and therefore to be useful for the historian. The law derived from rational choice theory can be substantiated through an analysis of any individual in any time period by observing that they, as a historical actor, (1) act, (2) do so rationally, and (3) seek their personal interest. These basic and universal claims of human action constitute one law which, when tested against the vast tapestry of history, seems to pass our standard as a constant.

Therefore, laws are and should be present in the discipline of history, as long as the law is an identifiable constant within human nature and is judiciously applied. The praxeological model of history meets these requirements and enables the use of rational assumptions to repair gaps in the historical record. By doing so, this model surmounts one of history and sociology's key obstacles, the inevitable existence of gaps in the historical record.