INTELLECTUAL EQUIPMENT

Worrying About Social Change

We bear the nineteenth century like an incubus. Inspect the map of almost any American city. Notice the telltale marks: rail lines slicing one section from another; a speculator’s grid, with its numbered rectilinear streets and avenues repeating themselves to the horizon; clustered residential areas, once serving as suburban middle-class refuges from the city but now absorbed into the urban mass. Stroll through and see it up close. Notice the characteristic artifacts: department store, office building, warehouse, factory, chimney, boiler, electric pole, street mixing people with machines. For all the twentieth century’s new technologies and stylistic experiments, the apparatus of everyday life still bears strong markings of the nineteenth century.

The same is true for many of our ideas and institutional arrangements. In the world of education, we still behave as though the effective way to prepare young intellects for the fight ahead were to divide all youngsters of a certain age into groups of twenty or thirty, place each group in a closed room with a somewhat older person, seat the youngsters in rows of small desks, arrange for the older person to talk to them for hours each day, have them write various sorts of exercises for
the older person to evaluate, and require them to speak periodically in class about the exercises they have written, about material they have read, about general issues the older person has raised. (Young people who survive a dozen years or so of that treatment often move on to the even stranger system of the lecture; there the older person gets to talk at them without interruption for fifty minutes at a time. Very nineteenth century!)

In these waning years of the twentieth century, the nineteenth century also keeps its hold on many ideas about social organization. In the analysis of social change, we cling loyally to ideas built up by nineteenth-century intellectuals. Intellectuals formed those ideas in their astonished reaction to what they saw going on around them: unprecedented concentrations of population, production, capital, coercive force, and organizational power. They formed ideas treating increasing differentiation as the master process of social change, ideas of societies as coherent but delicate structures vulnerable to imbalances between differentiation and integration, and other ideas connected to them.

The nineteenth-century incubus weighs us down. I hope this little book will serve as a lever to lift some of the burden. It addresses one big question: How can we improve our understanding of the large-scale structures and processes that were transforming the world of the nineteenth century and those that are transforming our world today? It asks in particular how comparisons among times, places, populations, structures, and processes can aid that understanding. It reviews a number of outstanding contributions to comparative analysis of big structures and large processes. On the way, it proposes accounts of national states, capitalist organization, urbanization, industrialization, and other big structures and large processes that often differ from conventional accounts. It enters a plea for historically grounded analyses of big structures and large processes as alternatives to the timeless, placeless models of social organization and social change that came to us with the nineteenth-century heritage.

Where did the old models come from? Before scholars codified them, practical people fashioned them to interpret their new, surprising nineteenth-century experiences. Let the nineteenth century speak.

“Machines are ruining all classes,” declared Johann Weinmann in
1849. Weinmann, master stocking knitter in Erlangen, Germany, described the machine as “the destroyer of households, the ruination of youth, the inducer of luxury, the spoiler of the forests, the populator of the workhouse, and soon the companion of general upheaval” (Shorter 1969: 206). Weinmann was, of all things, sharing his thoughts with King Maximilian of Bavaria. In the shadow of 1848’s revolution, King Max had established an essay contest on the topic of long-term remedies for material distress in Bavaria and in Germany as a whole. Weinmann’s reply arrived with over six hundred others.

From Ansbach, for example, police official Carl Seiffert sent in remarks on a related worry: “Now while the rich replenish their ranks with moderation and are purely conservative, the lower classes are thriving only too greatly and an enormous proletariat is growing up that, if an escape valve is not opened, will soon demand to divide up the property of the wealthy” (Shorter 1969: 201). Although Seiffert did not share Weinmann’s concern about machines, both writers feared the growth of a dissolute proletariat and warned of its threat to property and public order.

Three themes reverberated through the entries to King Max’s contest: overpopulation, mechanization, and immorality. The middle-class essayists felt that heedless breeding of the proletariat, migration of surplus rural people, and the consequent rapid growth of cities were creating new dangers for political and moral order. Many of them felt that machines threatened humanity. They argued, furthermore, that the combination of overpopulation with mechanization dissolved old social controls, thereby promoting dissolution, rebellion, crime, and violence. Traditional ways were disintegrating. Or so they thought.

Honest nineteenth-century burghers found many things about their century puzzling and distressing: the rapid growth of cities, the mechanization of industry, the restiveness of the poor. Putting such things together, they created a commonsense analysis of social change and its consequences. That bourgeois analysis posited an unending race between forces of differentiation and forces of integration. To the extent that differentiation proceeded faster than social integration, or to the extent that integration weakened, disorder resulted.

What, in this formulation, qualified as differentiation? Urbanization, industrialization, occupational specialization, the expansion of
consumer markets, increasing education — anything that seemed to compound the distinctions among people, the contact of unlike beings with each other.

What was integration? A sense of likeness, shared belief, respect for authority, satisfaction with modest rewards, fear of moral deviation — essentially a set of habits and attitudes that encouraged people to reproduce the existing structure of rewards and authority.

What, then, was disorder? At the small scale, popular violence, crime, immorality, madness. If urbanization, industrialization, and other differentiating changes occurred without a corresponding reinforcement of the sense of likeness, shared belief, and so on, these evils would beset individuals and families. At the large scale, popular rebellion, insubordination, class conflict. Increasing education, the expansion of markets, occupational specialization, and other forms of differentiation would cause these dangers as well, unless respect for authority, fear of moral deviation, and related forms of integration developed simultaneously — or at least survived. At either scale, a victory of differentiation over integration produced a threat to bourgeois security.

Nor were master stockingers and police officials the only people to see a contest between differentiation and integration. Their analyses did not differ fundamentally from the position Freihr Herr vom Stein had taken when addressing the Westphalian Parliament in 1831. The Freihr Herr was ending decades of public life; he died later that same year. Stein spoke of the “danger developing with the growth in numbers and claims of the lowest class of civil society.” “This class,” he declared, is forming in our cities out of a homeless, propertyless rabble and in the countryside from the mass of little cotters, squatters, settlers, marginals, and day-laborers. They nurture the envy and covetousness bred by various other ranks of civil society. The present condition of France shows us how seriously property and persons are threatened when all ranks on earth are made equal. Fidelity, love, religious and intellectual development are the foundations of public and personal happiness. Without such a base the clash of parties undermines every constitution. [Jantke and Hilger 1965: 133]

Population growth, according to this analysis, was swelling the dangerous classes and therefore increasing the differentiation of classes as it spread the demand for equality. The mechanisms of integration—
“fidelity, love, religious and intellectual development”—failed before the onslaught. The recent revolution (of 1830) in France made the dire consequences all too plain. Differentiation overwhelmed integration, and disorder flourished.

At the end of his long public life, Stein’s warning has its ironies. With his ally Hardenberg, after all, the Freiherr himself had initiated Prussia’s steps toward the liberation of the peasantry, the relaxation of restrictions on the exercise of various trades, and the constitutional reforms instituted at the start of the century.

Indeed, great landlord General von der Marwitz was to complain a few years later that Stein himself had started “the war of the propertyless against property, of industry against agriculture, of the transitory against the stable, of crass materialism against the divinely established order . . .” (Hamerow 1958: 69). Because of the destruction of lordly authority over the rural population, thought Marwitz, paternal control within the rural household had dissolved, young rustics considered themselves anyone’s equal, and youngsters “want nothing more than to leave their home towns as fast as possible, and to find the town with the least discipline, where the apprentice plays master at the inn. Thus it is no longer the best, but especially the worst and laziest, who go out into the world.” (Jantke and Hilger 1965: 136). Suddenly we see the distinction between modulated conservative caution and genuine reactionary hysteria.

Yet they have a common theme. To Stein, Marwitz, and other nineteenth-century conservatives or reactionaries, contemporary social change—in particular, the growth of a masterless proletariat—threatened to overwhelm the political and moral bases of public order.

The basic analysis, however, could take on tones ranging from radical to reactionary. As a radical, one could value the change greatly, identifying the rise of the working class with die Sozialbewegung, the Social Movement. As an anarchist, one could regard the disorder itself—so long as it acted in the right direction—as creative force. As a social reformer and surveyor, one could argue that if the growth of a proletariat caused disorder it was not because of the dissolution of social bonds or the diffusion of envy, but because sheer misery caused despair, and despair caused desperate action. As a laissez-faire liberal, one could consider the growth of the proletariat inevitable; then one might accept misery and disorder as costs of progress,
costs to be contained but never quite eliminated. As a conservative or reactionary, finally, one could value integration so much that any substantial change seemed threatening.

**Thinkers Face Change**

In all these views, a balance between the forces of differentiation and of integration determines the extent of disorder. Stein the reforming conservative and Proudhon the *anarchisant* socialist actually held similar commonsense analyses of social change and its consequences. In those analyses, they joined many of their nineteenth-century fellows. Consider Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous summary of factors behind the French Revolution of 1848, as he set them down in 1850–51:

The industrial revolution which in thirty years had made Paris the chief manufacturing city of France and had brought within its walls a whole new mass of workers to whom work on fortifications had added another mass of unemployed agricultural workers.

The love of material satisfactions which, with encouragement from the government, agitated that multitude more and more, and fomented in it the democratic illness of envy.

Newborn economic and political theories which tended to make people think that human misery was a result of laws and not of providence, that one could eliminate poverty by changing the system of taxation.

The contempt in which the governing class, and especially those at its head, had fallen—contempt so deep and general that it paralyzed the resistance of even those who had the greatest reason for maintaining the power that was being overthrown.

The centralization which reduced the whole revolutionary action to seizing control of Paris and taking hold of the assembled machinery of government.

Finally, the mobility of everything—institutions, ideas, customs, and men—in a moving society which had been stirred up by seven great revolutions in
less than sixty years, not to mention a multitude of secondary shocks. [Tocqueville 1978: 113–14]

Tocqueville’s emphasis on government brought in elements that Freiherr vom Stein had neglected in 1831. Yet when it came to questions of mobility and integration, Tocqueville clung to the commonsense interpretation of social change and its consequences. In his thinking of 1848, industrial expansion and population mobility challenged the state’s integrative power. In his opinion, the contemporary state had failed the test.

Out of such nineteenth-century reflections on capitalism, national states, and the consequences of their growth grew the disciplines of social science as we know them. Economists constructed theories of capitalism, political scientists theories of states, sociologists theories of those societies that contained national states, anthropologists theories of stateless societies. Each discipline bore marks of its birthdate; economists were obsessed by markets, political scientists concerned by citizen-state interactions, sociologists worried by the maintenance of social order, and anthropologists bemused by cultural evolution toward the fully developed world of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, all disciplines dipped into their century’s evolutionary thinking to some degree. For all of them, increasing differentiation—as specialized production, as individualism, as interest groups, or as something else—took on the air of a general historical law. For all of them, increasing differentiation posed a difficult problem of social integration. The sense of evolution appeared clearly in the great sociological dichotomies: status and contract, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, primary and secondary groups, mechanistic and organic solidarity.

What Was Happening?

Nineteenth-century European observers were not wrong to think that great changes were happening. For several centuries, industrial expansion had occurred mainly in small towns and rural areas. Rapidly
multiplying capitalists had acted mainly as merchants rather than direct supervisors of manufacturing. Capital therefore accumulated more than it concentrated, as the proliferation of semi-independent producers in households and small shops accounted for most of the large increase in manufacturing. In that era of mercantile capitalism, the European population had been very mobile, but had moved mainly within regional labor markets or in great systems of circular migration. Although regional labor markets and long-distance circuits deposited a residue of migrants in cities, mortality, fertility, and migration combined to produce no more than modest urban growth. Indeed, many cities lost population when the pace of activity in their hinterlands slowed.

During the nineteenth century, in contrast, capital concentrated. Individual capitalists and firms acquired much greater masses of productive means than they had ever owned before. Capitalists took direct hold over the processes of production and located them increasingly near markets and sources of energy or raw materials instead of near supplies of self-sustaining labor. Production, rather than exchange, became the nexus of capitalism. Accordingly, the process of proletarianization that had long been at work in the countryside moved to the city. Large firms employing disciplined wage-workers in urban locations became increasingly important worksites. Workers migrated from industrial hamlets, villages, and towns toward manufacturing cities and industrial employment, as displaced agricultural workers moved into urban services and unskilled labor. Small wonder that Karl Marx, observing these very processes, should fix on the separation of labor from the means of production and the conversion of surplus value into fixed capital as virtual laws of nature.

As results of this urban implosion of capital, net rural-urban migration accelerated, cities increased rapidly, large areas of the countryside deindustrialized, and differences between country and city accentuated. Mechanization of production facilitated the concentration of capital and the subordination of labor. Sometimes, in fact, we write this history as the story of technical improvements in production. At its extreme, the technological account postulates an “industrial revolution” depending on a rapid shift to grouped machine production fueled by inanimate sources of energy and dates “industrialization” from that proliferation of factories, machines, and industrial cities.
Within manufacturing, the pace of technical innovation did accelerate during the nineteenth century. The spinning jenny, the power loom, and the blast furnace certainly increased the amounts that spinners, weavers, and smelters could produce in a day. Steam power, assembly lines, and factories evidently became crucial to many branches of industry after 1750. In all these regards and more, the nineteenth century made a technological break with its predecessors.

To call the nineteenth-century reorganization of production an “industrial revolution,” nevertheless, exaggerates the centrality of technological changes. It draws attention away from the great transformation of relations between capital and labor that marked the century. It ignores the fact that in all industrial countries, including England, small shops predominated in almost all branches of production up to the start of the twentieth century. Not until the automobile era did time-disciplined, assembly-line factories become the characteristic sites of proletarian production. To date industrialization from the development of the factory, furthermore, relegates to nothingness centuries of expansion in manufacturing via the multiplication of small producing units linked by merchant capitalists. It also hides the vast deindustrialization of the European countryside that accompanied the nineteenth-century implosion of manufacturing into cities.

As capitalism was undergoing fundamental alterations, European states were likewise entering a new era. By the second half of the eighteenth century, national states had made themselves the dominant organizations in most parts of Europe. Their preparations for war had become so extensive and costly that military expenditure and payments for war debts occupied the largest shares of most state budgets. The strongest states had built great apparatuses for the extraction from their populations of the means of war: conscripts, food, supplies, money, and more money. Paradoxically, the very construction of large military organizations reduced the autonomy of military men and created large civilian bureaucracies. The process of bargaining with ordinary people for their acquiescence and their surrender of resources—money, goods, labor power—engaged the civilian managers of the state in establishing limits to state control, perimeters to state violence, and mechanisms for eliciting the consent of the subject population.

Those states, however, continued to rule indirectly. For routine
enforcement of their decisions, collection of revenues, and maintenance of public order, they depended mainly on local notables. The notables did not derive their power or tenure from the pleasure of superiors in the governmental hierarchy. They retained plenty of room for maneuver on behalf of their own interests. As a result, much of the business of national authorities consisted of negotiating with local and regional notables. Ordinary people carried on an active political life, but almost entirely on a local or regional level. When they did get involved in national struggles for power, it ordinarily happened through the mediation of local notables, or in alliance with them.

During the nineteenth century, all this changed. Although war kept on getting more costly and destructive, it less often pitted members of the European state system against one another and more often involved conquest outside of Europe. Revolutionary and reformist governments extended their direct rule to individual communities and even to households. In the process of bargaining with ordinary people for even greater resources, statesmen solidified representative institutions, binding national elections, and a variety of means by which ordinary people could participate routinely in national politics.

Under pressure from their constituents, likewise, states took on responsibilities for public services, economic infrastructure, and household welfare to degrees never previously attained. The managers of national states shifted from reactive to active repression; authorities moved from violent reactions against rebellion and resistance as they occurred toward active surveillance of the population and vigorous attempts to forestall rebellion and resistance. All these activities supplanted autonomous local or regional notables and put functionaries in their places. As a consequence, notables lost much of their strength and attractiveness as intermediaries in the attempts of ordinary people to realize their interests. Those were the nineteenth century’s great changes.

**Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons**

Nineteenth-century Europe’s great shifts in organization set the frame for this book in two complementary ways. First, those shifts formed the context in which our current standard ideas for the analysis of big
social structures, large social processes, and huge comparisons among social experiences crystallized. Second, they marked critical moments in changes that are continuing on a world scale today. Understanding those changes and their consequences is our most pressing reason for undertaking the systematic study of big structures and large processes. We must look at them comparatively over substantial blocks of space and time, in order to see whence we have come, where we are going, and what real alternatives to our present condition exist. Systematic comparison of structures and processes will not only place our own situation in perspective, but also help in the identification of causes and effects.

With capitalism and the state in rapid transformation, nineteenth-century European burghers, intellectuals, and powerholders had good cause to worry about social change. They made serious, even desperate, efforts to understand what was happening to them. Those efforts created the nineteenth-century conceptions which now encumber our thought.

From a mistaken reading of nineteenth-century social changes emerged the eight Pernicious Postulates of twentieth-century social thought. They include these principles:

1. “Society” is a thing apart; the world as a whole divides into distinct “societies,” each having its more or less autonomous culture, government, economy, and solidarity.
2. Social behavior results from individual mental events, which are conditioned by life in society. Explanations of social behavior therefore concern the impact of society on individual minds.
3. “Social change” is a coherent general phenomenon, explicable en bloc.
4. The main processes of large-scale social change take distinct societies through a succession of standard stages, each more advanced than the previous stage.
5. Differentiation forms the dominant, inevitable logic of large-scale change; differentiation leads to advancement.
6. The state of social order depends on the balance between processes of differentiation and processes of integration or control; rapid or excessive differentiation produces disorder.
7. A wide variety of disapproved behavior—including madness, murder, drunkenness, crime, suicide, and rebellion—results from the strain produced by excessively rapid social change.
"Illegitimate" and "legitimate" forms of conflict, coercion, and expropriation stem from essentially different processes: processes of change and disorder on one side, and processes of integration and control on the other.

All eight are mistakes. Although national states do, indeed, exist, there is no "society" that somehow exercises social control and embodies shared conceptions of reality. Social behavior does not result from the impact of society on individual minds, but from relationships among individuals and groups. "Social change" is not a general process, but a catchall name for very different processes varying greatly in their connection to each other. Stage theories of social change assume an internal coherence and a standardization of experiences that disappear at the first observation of real social life.

The difficulties continue. Although differentiation is certainly one important process of change, many of the fundamental changes in our era actually entail dedifferentiation, and to some of them the question of differentiation is secondary or even irrelevant. It is simply not true that rapid social change produces generalized strain, which in turn creates alternative forms of disorder as a function of the available avenues of escape. The more closely we look, the more coercion by officials resembles coercion by criminals, state violence resembles private violence, authorized expropriation resembles theft. We will return to these difficulties repeatedly later on.

The eight illusions connect neatly; they follow from a sharp division between the forces of order and the forces of disorder:

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<th>ORDER</th>
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<td>society</td>
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<td>satisfaction</td>
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These sharp dichotomies rest on a sense that social order is fragile, that differentiation threatens social order, that change is risky, that unrestrained change generates strain, violence, decay, and disintegration, that only guided and contained change leads to integration, satisfac-
tion, and progress. They express the will of powerholders—actual or would-be—to improve the people around them, by means of coercion and persuasion, at a minimum cost. To the extent that they still promulgate these ideas, the social sciences of the twentieth century remain the bearers of nineteenth-century folk wisdom.

My summary exaggerates the unity of nineteenth-century thought. The opposition of order to disorder characterizes the teachings of Durkheim and Tönnies much more than those of Marx or Weber. Both Marx and Weber regarded a sort of order as all too likely. They thought it would take demonic force—of revolution or of charisma—to disrupt the existing order. But Marx and Weber stood far from nineteenth-century folk wisdom. Sadly, the lines of social-scientific thought that embodied folk wisdom prevailed well into the twentieth century.

Fortunately, the social sciences that formed in the nineteenth century also took observation seriously. Much the same spirit that brought burghers and bureaucrats to worry about rising disorder induced social reformers and officials to undertake surveys of living conditions, establish household censuses, collect statistics, and publish documented descriptions of social life. In western Europe, the half-century from 1870 to 1920 was the golden age of official statistics and social surveys; after that period, official statistics and social surveys became more efficient and regular, but lost much of their richness. However faulty, the results of social inquiries set challenges to theories of social change; at a minimum, analysts had to explain away the contrary evidence. A combination of mutual criticism and accumulated evidence has made it clear that the eight great nineteenth-century postulates are illusions.

What to Do

If the notion of a contest between differentiation and integration fails us, if we cannot usefully reduce social behavior to the impact of society on individual minds, if the picture of the world as an ensemble of coherent societies, each undergoing similar processes of change in partial independence from the others, misleads us, if the analytic distinction between legitimate and illegitimate varieties of coercion
blocks our comprehension of political processes, if there is no general phenomenon of social change whose sequences and consequences we can usefully model, much of the intellectual apparatus social scientists have inherited from the nineteenth century will not work. What should we do?

We should build concrete and historical analyses of the big structures and large processes that shape our era. The analyses should be concrete in having real times, places, and people as their referents and in testing the coherence of the postulated structures and processes against the experiences of real times, places, and people. They should be historical in limiting their scope to an era bounded by the playing out of certain well-defined processes, and in recognizing from the outset that time matters—that when things happen within a sequence affects how they happen, that every structure or process constitutes a series of choice points. Outcomes at a given point in time constrain possible outcomes at later points in time.

If the work is historical, it need not be grand. When it comes to understanding proletarianization, for example, much of the most valuable work proceeds at the scale of a single village. Keith Wrightson and David Levine’s study of Terling, Essex, from 1525 to 1700 tells us more about the creation of a propertyless underclass than do reams of general essays about capitalism. Ted Margadant’s analysis of the 1851 insurrection against Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état has more to teach about the actual process of rebellion than dozens of broad statements about the pattern of revolt in Europe as a whole.

Nor, for that matter, need historical work concern the distant past. Take Arthur Stinchcombe’s treatment of the durable influence of the “social technology” prevailing at the time of an organization’s founding on its basic structure. Stinchcombe applies essentially the same analysis to the structures of industrial crafts, men’s college fraternities, savings banks, trade unions, and other organizations. He shows both that organizations of a given type tend to be established in spurts and that the structures they adopt at the outset persist over long periods of time (Stinchcombe 1965: 153ff.). While the argument is eminently historical, it brings us right up to the present. A concrete, historical program of inquiry must include work at the small scale and can well include our own time.

In the case of Western countries over the last few hundred years, the
program begins by recognizing that the development of capitalism and the formation of powerful, connected national states dominated all other social processes and shaped all social structures. The program continues by locating times, places, and people within those two master processes and working out the logics of the processes. It goes on by following the creation and destruction of different sorts of structures by capitalism and statemaking, then tracing the relationship of other processes—for example, migration, urbanization, fertility change, and household formation—to capitalism and statemaking. A demanding program, but a rewarding one.

This book makes only a small contribution to the program. For Western countries in recent centuries, it asks:

1. What fundamental large-scale processes must we distinguish in order to understand how that world has changed and is changing?
2. How do those processes relate to each other?
3. What social structures experience those processes?
4. How can systematic, large-scale comparison help us understand the structures and processes involved?
5. In approaching these questions, how much should we rely on the intellectual frames we have inherited from the nineteenth century?

In trying to answer these questions, I reason mainly from a series of outstanding works that have addressed them in recent years. Most of my examples come from sociology and political science. Those are the two fields of the social sciences that produce the largest volume of self-conscious large-scale, comparative research on social structures and processes. I regret my relative neglect of anthropology, economics, geography, and, especially, history. But each of them poses special problems deserving discussion by themselves. Some other time.

In aiming a small book at large questions, I have veered away from may problems other authors might reasonably take up under the headings “big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons.” In the pages to come, you will find little discussion of the logic of comparison as such; “strategies for the comparative study of big structures and large processes” comes closer to my intentions. Although I discuss a number of specific writings, you will look in vain for a continuous, comprehensive history of thinking about big structures and large processes. You will find no reviews of previous works on comparative analysis;
little treatment of existing models of migration, population growth, capital accumulation, and other large processes; not much on techniques or evidence.

For the most part, I will resist the temptation to trot out examples of bad comparative analysis, like prisoners from their cells, for interrogation and shaming; many convicts languish deservedly in those cells, but they will stay in the dark. In compensation, the bibliography contains enough references on these matters for someone to start a campaign of systematic reading.

Do those omissions leave anything to talk about? Plenty, I think. First, a review of the eight misleading postulates we have inherited from nineteenth-century social science. Then, a discussion of various strategies for comparison of big structures and large processes. Along the way, observations and speculations on what actually happened in modern Europe.

The book’s three elements dovetail nicely. Criticism of misleading nineteenth-century ideas leads effortlessly both to a search for comparisons to test and revise those ideas and to the formulation of alternative histories for the Western past.