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Making the Most of an Historical Case Study: Configuration, Sequence, Casing, and the US Old-age Pension Movement

Edwin Amenta

Methodological and metatheoretical break-throughs in historical sociology over the last two decades seem to have put historical sociologists in a bind. This bounty of thinking and applications has provided new insights, such as a focus on path dependence and time order in explanations, and new tools, such as formal qualitative techniques for historical sociologists and historical institutionalists in political science (Hall and Taylor 1996, Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Historical sociology has become unbound from the primitive small-N comparative methods present at its founding. At the same time, historical social scientists are expected to act more like historians in their use of archival materials and understanding of time (Sewell 2006). Social scientists are to take a prospective

outlook, rather than the retrospective views of old-style comparative and historical research. These injunctions tend to turn historical social scientists toward case studies. Yet the expectations for greater sophistication in causal argumentation, methods of analysis, and in historical thinking and practices have made historical sociological investigations more difficult to undertake and to make the claims in them stick.

Historical sociology has become more historical in two key ways. The first is analytical and associated with social scientists. Historical sociologists have become increasingly sensitive to time order in explanations and to the possibilities of path dependence (Abbott 1992a, Griffin 1992, Pierson 2000). In narrative causal accounts, as opposed to

standard variable-based discussions, when something happens is often key to its influence in processes of major change (Griffin 1992, Sewell 2006). Similarly, the possibility of path dependence, or the process of increasing returns for institutions once they are formed, means that causes of the rise of these institutions will have a different influence, possibly none at all, once the institutions are set in place (Mahoney 2000, Pierson 2000).

The second historical turn is a matter of practice. Historical social scientists are expected to act more like historians (Sewell 2006). Instead of relying on secondary sources, historical social scientists nowadays develop a deep knowledge of their case or cases. Following this lead typically this means an engagement in the kind of archival research that will ward off misunderstandings and reveal how key actors thought about what they were doing. It is no longer considered sufficient simply to maintain a broadly comparative perspective, and the comparative method of Mills as well as the far more sophisticated comparative methodologies that have arisen since can be handled appropriately only when the investigator has a sufficiently deep knowledge of the empirical material. Historical social scientists are also warned against biases and gaps in historiography (Lustick 1996). In addition, the narrative causal accounts of historians are viewed as based more on rhetorical form and convention than systematic attempts at developing time-ordered causal arguments that combine structures, mechanisms, and events (Griffin 1992). Being historical in this second sense is both time consuming and demands skills, such as interpreting documents, in which social scientists are usually untrained.

At the same time, however, historical sociologists and historical institutionalists in political science are expected to retain social science's concern with the general. There are few academic rewards for social scientists knowing a case well. This means theorizing in a causal way about conditions beyond the observed instances and devising scope conditions around one's theoretical claims. These claims are expected in turn to be

more sophisticated, combining events and structures and considerations of time order and the possibility of path dependence. Social scientists are also expected to provide plausible empirical demonstrations of their claims. Although formal qualitative methods have been developed to address some of these concerns, these methods typically involve creating, manipulating, and analyzing datasets in newly sophisticated ways, and thus raise their own questions.

Given these competing demands, what are historical social scientists – aside from engaging in further metatheoretical critique – to do? I argue that these developments provide more opportunities than constraints by way of research on the impact of social movements on policymaking (Amenta et al. 2005, Amenta 2006). Specifically, I trace the influence of the Townsend Plan and the old-age pension movement on the rise of US old-age policy and what is commonly known here as Social Security. In this research, I have sought to take history seriously in both senses of the word. First, I think explicitly about timing and sequence and pay attention to multiple and conjunctural causation. I try to indicate the combinations and sequences of events, actions, and structures that led to a major institutional shift in policy, based on competing visions about the role of and reasons for public social provision. I attend to the historical understandings of all the key actors, with all the archival legwork that implies, while seeking to address general theoretical arguments about the consequences of social movements and the development of welfare states. In doing so, I am aided by a search to understand and make sense of what the episode in history is a case of (Ragin 1992). This exercise can help a scholar devise and propose scope conditions, conceptually based delimitations around the theorizing, advancing theoretical speculation about other situations in which the claims might also hold good. I suggest that scholars go deeper into their cases, but not so far native as to neglect more general theorizing, and that recent developments in historical sociology can help.

HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY TODAY

Historical sociology has always taken as its subject the explanation of major institutional changes and shifts – revolutions, the rise of states, the appearance of democratic institutions, the initiation of welfare states, and the like (see Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). Before the breakthroughs in metatheoretical and methodological thinking, scholars would use standard comparative or quantitative analyses to delineate and isolate key factors or sometimes merely one key factor posited to produce the shift or phenomenon. But it is no longer generally considered to be the best practice to develop or appraise causal accounts deploying standard comparative methods on a reading of secondary literature on the subject in the manner of Moore's (1966) or Skocpol's (1979) early work and isolating general structural factors leading to institutional changes. Moore notably attempted to say something very general based entirely on limited secondary sources. Today, scholarship tends to seek less general claims rooted in more in-depth knowledge.

Configurational and sequential causation

Analytical, metahistorical, and methodological developments in historical sociology have yielded several insights that have achieved something like consensus among today's historical social scientists. Some of these insights have come from the upgrading of the standard comparative methods that were initially viewed as the keystone of historical sociology (and, indeed, the main organization in sociology promoting historical sociology is a section called Comparative and Historical Sociology). First, any causal account must take into consideration the likelihood that the outcome is the result of more than one cause – a configuration or conjuncture of causes – and also that there is more than one causal configuration possible to produce the outcome (Ragin 1987). Scholars are expected to seek out multiple, conjunctural causes for major social and political changes (Katznelson 1997), or what is sometimes referred to as 'equifinality' (George and Bennett 2005).

On top of the understanding that causation is likely to be multiple and conjunctural, causes of institutional shifts are considered to be in the social science sense of word historical. The timing and sequence of causes matter. Not only will a causal factor be expected to have an effect only in conjunction with others, but a potential causal condition will work differently depending on where it appears in a sequence of causes and events (Griffin 1992), and events can alter structures in different ways (Sewell 2006). These causes might include structures, actors, and events and in ways that do justice to time order and possible path dependencies. In short, causal recipes, like recipes in cookbooks, need to list more than the combinations of causal ingredients deemed necessary and sufficient to cause the change. Scholars are expected to address issues of order, timing, and pace in making conjunctural causal arguments.

Yet the causes in any configurational sequence may also be contingent or accidental (Sewell 2006). Some conditions, events, or actions may be necessary for major institutional change to happen, but may be idiosyncratic to the case (Isaac et al. 1994). Indeed, in Stinchcombe's (1968) account of 'historicist' causation, factors in which the accidental may be central provoke institutional change that is impervious to change. As Pierson (2000) has shown, institutional change often provides self-reinforcing mechanisms that help to prevent further change (see also Mahoney 2000, Mahoney and Schensul 2006). From this understanding of path dependence, a set of conditions provokes institutional change, but afterward the reappearance of these conditions would not have the same effect. For instance, control of the US government by a right-wing regime in the late 1930s would have been sufficient to abolish Social Security as social insurance, but a Republican regime holding all branches of government after 2004 could not do so given how far the program had developed and the size of the constituency backing it.

Every historical social scientist an historian

Aside from needing to take into account issues of timing and pace in the manner of historians, historical sociologists have been enjoined to act like historians in more mundane ways that go beyond simply employing data that they do not initially collect (Miriampolski and Hughes 1978). Social scientists need to engage debates in historiography and often assess historical materials independently. That is because there are likely to be selection problems and biases in the extant historiography on many subjects (Lustick 1996), and thus even a comprehensive knowledge of the secondary sources on a given subject may be insufficient. Even if historiography were somehow comprehensive, other issues would arise. Although historians often produce narrative accounts in the sense of making time-order causal claims, these claims are frequently done unsystematically and are considered by historical, in the first sense, social scientists to be suspect (Griffin 1992). These warnings suggest that historical social scientists need to read historiography critically, but also engage in some independent inspection and interpretation of the materials from which historians have drawn inferences.

Other demands on historical social scientists firmly suggest a strong engagement with case materials. Theoretical processes need to be understood and appraised, and the best way to do so is by a way of deep historical knowledge. Specifically, arguments in historical social science often concern the thinking of key actors behind their actions, and historiography may give only a partial or biased account of this thinking. When general social scientific arguments are unpacked for their mechanisms, the bits of theory connecting major claims, they are also best appraised by detailed examinations of case materials. Process tracing (George and Bennett 2005, Hall 2003) of this sort tends to require deep knowledge of cases.

But acting more like historians makes historical sociology more time-consuming and difficult. There are no shortcuts to mastering historiography or engaging in archival work. More significantly, these strictures tend to force historical social scientists deeper into their cases and tend toward the case study. That is to say, social scientists seeking deep historical knowledge will be pushed toward studies of developments in fewer countries or places within a country over briefer periods of time. For some subjects, notably studying social movement organizations and challengers, the push is even stronger; demands on time due to the need for historical reconstruction are typically great (Tilly 2006), because their traces of activity are more difficult to locate.

The ever-present concern for the general

Yet even sociologists willing to shed the general linear reality of standard quantitative methods, as Abbott (1992a) has called it, usually seek to develop or appraise theoretical arguments that are in some ways or in some parts transportable to other cases, however defined. A case study that provides a complete theoretical informed explanation of some large institutional shift is typically not sufficient for sociological analyses. An understanding of what is accidental is often important in these explanations, but accidental events cannot be the focus of historical sociology. A key part of the social science project is to isolate theoretical argumentation of some form or another that would be expected in well-defined circumstances or contexts to produce similar phenomena. Typically, these contexts, or scope conditions, are defined conceptually (George and Bennett 2005). One may expect certain structures, short-term causes and events to lead to similar outcomes in rich democratic societies during the period of the rise of welfare states. Sometimes, however, scholars set contexts not conceptually, but by way a specific place and a historical period, such as in the United States between the wars. Scholars employing the latter 'proper name' strategy (Przeworski and Teune 1970) may do so because they are not adept at theorizing or because they

doubt the validity and usefulness of extensive theorizing (Collier and Mazzuca 2006). For those theorizing scope conditions a deeper historical knowledge of cases may make the conditions more plausible.

The extensiveness of the transportable parts of social science theorizing in any case study varies according to the preferences and inclinations of scholars. Theoretical causal claims range from the expansive and heroic generalizations of rational choice theorists (Kiser and Hechter 1991) to complete explanations of individual institutional shifts or developments across one case or very similar cases (Steinmetz 2004). The causal claims may also involve among other things drawing deep analogies (Stinchcombe 1978), isolating 'mechanisms' that are general but with different influences in different temporal and institutional contexts (McAdam et al. 2001), or developing claims meant to explain developments across a defined population over a period of time (Ertman 1997). Regardless of whether one seeks the invariant generalizations once common among comparative social scientists (Skocpol and Somers 1980) or adequate causal explanations of specific cases, the problem of empirical demonstration remains. Historical social scientists are expected to provide evidentiary demonstrations that support their more sophisticated theoretical claims and cast doubt on plausible alternatives. One question is whether case studies can do more than simply suggest hypotheses and build theory, which would require appraisal on other cases, disconfirm very general theoretical claims, or stand as a single instance of support for some theoretical claim (Lijphart 1971; cf Rueschemeyer 2003, George and Bennett 2005).

Do formal qualitative methods solve the problem?

Quantitative and formal qualitative methods have been developed to address some of the issues surrounding multiple, conjunctural and time-order causation. The formal qualitative methods include among others fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) and

event structure analysis (Griffin 1993, Isaac et al. 1994). Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analyses notably make it possible to isolate conditions necessary and sufficient for highly unusual results, such as major institutional change, although the measures themselves may need to be converted into ones that are sensitive to time order to make arguments historical in the social science sense (Caren and Panofsky 2005). Each of these approaches is in some ways limited for scholars of case studies. The crisp and fuzzy forms of qualitative comparative analysis typically imply comparative analyses, not case studies, though it is possible to use them to make sense of individual cases (but more on that below). And event-structure analyses tend either to provide specific interpretations and causal accounts of events or provide aid in the development of theory in the social science sense of historical.

Yet analyzing any dataset with time-sensitive quantitative or formal qualitative methods, no matter how sophisticated, does not address being historical in the second sense – for historical social scientists to think and act as historians do. Only a deep knowledge of the case materials can aid in understanding where timing might and might not matter and in addressing the many counterfactual questions inherent in historical research. Scholars can be widely comparative from this way of thinking only with an encyclopedic knowledge of cases. What is more, deeply historical methods like process tracing (George and Bennett 2005) that seek to appraise mechanisms or the smaller bits and connections in wider theoretical arguments are far more labor-intensive than the manipulation of pre-packaged datasets across many cases. The stricture to gain a deeper understanding tends to focus scholars studying relatively recent phenomena in what are typically considered 'case studies' (cf Ragin 1992) – analyzing developments in one country across a given period of time.

The availability of new time- and configuration-sensitive formal qualitative and quantitative techniques does not solve the problems flowing from the need for deep

knowledge. These qualitative methods necessarily rely on the manipulation of datasets, which in turn are produced or assembled by someone. If that someone does not have a deep knowledge of the cases at hand and the historical circumstances surrounding them, the connection between concepts and measures may become tenuous and the results of analyses worthless. Even event structure analysis, a formal qualitative tool that forces scholars to be explicit about their counterfactual reasoning, requires valid basic accounts before it can be employed. To use event structure analysis to explain a particular event and generate more general hypotheses, for instance, about specific lynchings (Griffin 1993), scholars need first to have valid and reasonably complete factual accounts of them or the means to reconstruct them.

Similarly, in standard crisp qualitative comparative analyses, designing the truth table is a task with steep knowledge requirements (Ragin 1987). Decisions about break points and degree of membership in categories of fuzzy sets also depend on such knowledge (Ragin 2000). That said, as I argue below, gaining deep knowledge of cases can help to exploit the full benefits of methods like fsQCA, rather than using them as a kind of alternative to quantitative techniques for the testing of more sophisticated configurational and multicausal hypotheses.

Casing and historical sociology

More generally, historical social scientists like other qualitative researchers share deeper concerns about the sort of theoretical case that is uncovered, discovered, or created in the process of research. What is the case a case of? (Becker 1992, Ragin 1992) is a question that scholars are enjoined to ask themselves as they complete their investigations. Scholars paying attention to this issue can make theoretical connections that help to draw new conceptual lines around phenomena previously seen as disparate and not obviously comparable. The study may thus prompt the investigator to identify a new class of phenomena that might have similar causes and consequences or add new instances to existing classes of phenomena. Scholars engaged in what are typically known as case studies, in that they focus one country, movement, or policy, are typically enjoined to develop extra observations to make their claims compelling (King et al. 1994). But these case studies also provide an opportunity to think more deeply and conceptually about the phenomena revealed during the analysis and scope conditions on arguments (George and Bennett 2005). Thus disadvantages in empirical demonstrations can be turned into analytical advantages.

One of the advantages of casing over other candidates for addressing general is that it retains the entire case as an analytical unit, subject to understanding and explanation. By comparison, if one is addressing theories based on mechanisms, the mechanism itself becomes the analytical unit, and in the search for similar mechanisms in different circumstances the advantages of understanding the case as an entire configuration or something with a beginning middle and end may be lost. A focus on mechanisms may come at the expense of explaining and understanding, say, a social movement that acts in a time and place with a beginning and an end or a period of policy reform that starts from almost nothing and ends with the building of durable institutions.

There is also the advantage in generalization in casing. Typically, social scientists choose cases on the basis of their being a part of some larger theoretical population; cases can be claimed to be typical of a larger group or they may be seen as atypical and thus extra worthy of explanation (Walton 1992). In the process of engaging in research, scholars can refine the understanding of this more general population and situate the case more precisely with respect to others deemed as otherwise similar. However, one can also think of a case study as containing empirical instances of more than one conceptual or theoretical construct (Platt 1992, Ragin 1992). Thus, scholars can influence several theoretical debates in the context of one case study, rather than being

limited to one, as is the case for most large-N research.

In short, historical social science expects more sophisticated theorizing, a kind of explanatory richness that takes into account the possibility of historical and multiple conjunctural causation and path dependence. Scholars may need to employ more sophisticated methods that can address combinations of time-ordered causes. Historical social scientists also must remain alert to issues surrounding cases. In the minimal sense this sensitivity includes seeking out other information and analytical opportunities that might help to make causal claims more convincing (King et al. 1994); these demonstrations can range from gathering related large-N datasets to comparisons of similar cases with secondary sources to imaginary experiments. In addition, claims rely on a deep knowledge of the case or cases. Yet for all these new strictures, historical sociology is presented many opportunities and some of the insights provide opportunities to overcome the problems provoked by others. The concern with thinking about types of case can help when scholars seek to abstract out what is general in their explanations. A deep knowledge of cases increases the chances that any datasets derived from them will be valid. They will also provide scholars the opportunity to explore and appraise arguments about the determinants of institutional shifts and other unusual outcomes, as well as to help make better sense of their cases.

THE HISTORICAL CASE: THE TOWNSEND PLAN AND SOCIAL SECURITY

In my study of the Townsend Plan, old-age pension movements, and the rise of Social Security, I wanted to know whether the Townsend Plan had an impact on old-age policy. In particular, did the pension movement produce social security as we know it today, or fundamentally turn US social policy toward the old-age welfare state that it has become? After all, Social Security and Medicare are now the two biggest-budget items and much of Medicare is also slanted toward old age (see Amenta et al. 2005 and Amenta 2006 for most of the support for the following). I was asking both specific questions about whether a movement had an impact on a major institutional shift in public policy and if so which combinations of structures and circumstances caused that result. I was seeking to be historical in both main senses of the word. I was also seeking explanations with applicability beyond the instance I was examining – which made it pressing to understand what my case was a case of, with possibly more than one answer. In dealing with the strictures to become historical in both senses I went native for a while as an historian, but tried to emerge from the archives with social science theoretical insights and demonstrations of argument.

The Townsend Plan was a crusade named after Dr Francis E. Townsend, a California physician who was 73 in 1933 when he began a career in activism. The Townsend Plan, the name of both organization and program, called for a national, generous old-age pension for any citizen of age 60 or older who agreed to be retired and to spend the money quickly. It was designed to end poverty in old age and the Great Depression. In 1936, two million older Americans were members of approximately 8000 Townsend clubs. The Townsend Plan was one of the 57 voluntary associations ever to win membership from 1 per cent or more of the US adult population (Skocpol 2003). Although no version of Townsend's program ever became law, contemporaries, historians, and social scientists disagree about whether and how much the organization advanced US old-age policy. The Townsend Plan was later joined by a series of pension organizations that worked mainly at the State level. After 1950, however, the Townsend Plan was no longer a serious challenger and in 1980 became one of the few of the 57 to fall out of existence, suffering the fate of the International Workers of the World and the second Ku Klux Klan.

Questions and answers

The question was, at bottom, about the impact of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement on the vision animating old-age policy. The model pressed by the Townsendites and the pension movement was to provide stipends to citizens in a generous, equal, and universal fashion. The main alternatives included a compulsory, government-administered annuity for individuals, paying out according to what individuals paid in; social insurance for the risk of growing old without an income or a family breadwinner; means-tested and minimal stipends with supervision and loss of citizenship rights; and the existing non-system of wholly inadequate and idiosyncratic State and local public aid. The Social Security Act provided a combination of the means-tested model, applied immediately in States with some national standards and individual State decisions, and a national annuity model, designed for the future The Townsend Plan and the pension movement sought to implode the means-tested model, engaging State by State in action to increase the stipends and their liberality, while removing restrictions on beneficiaries' rights, such as allowing them to bequeath rather than forfeit their property. For the long run, the Townsend Plan and pension movement sought to replace the annuity model at the national level with its own universal and generous pension.

I also theorized about the conditions under which political impacts by movements were likely. My political mediation model claims that collective action is political mediated in its political influence (see Amenta et al. 2005, Amenta 2006 Chapter 2). The essential idea was that the favorable political contexts, generally based on the partisanship of regimes in power, would increase the productivity of collective action. I also argued that assertive, rather than noninstitutional, action would be the most productive, though there were also political contexts, such as underdemocratized polities, where collective action over policy would be fruitless without prior structural political reform, and highly favorable political conditions that would amplify the impact

of action. I developed specific claims about matches of different strategies in different political contexts and fine-grained arguments about small and medium amounts of influence. The alternative arguments in the social science literature about the impact of social movements were largely one-factor claims about strategies, form of organization, or political contexts that were expected to work regardless of other circumstances.

I theorized as well the special case in which radical and far-reaching outcomes, such as creating a shift in public policy along the lines demanded by the Townsend Plan, would occur. As controlling the government through a new party is rarely an option in a political setting like the US one, and initiatives and referendums are available only in some States, I argued that a challenger with far-reaching goals will need to have several things, many of them outside the challenger's control, happen at the same time to have a major influence: a favorable political context, its issue on the political agenda, high and widespread challenger organization and mobilization, credible claims-making directed at elites and the general public, and plausible assertive action. Although I was studying and theorizing major shifts in public policy, I was thinking that the same was likely to be true for bids to transform politically the structural position of groups, such as through voting or civil rights.

One of the important parts of political contexts included the institutionalization of old-age policy. Working from the standard historical institutionalist idea that new policy – key events that change structures – transforms politics, I understood the institutionalization of policy as a target that might pick up speed and move to different places. At the earliest stages, I expected that a movement would have the greatest opening for influence but, as time went on, the train would be moving further and faster away from the station, picking up reinforcements along the way. Any new program develops an interested clientele and provides the political problems associated with its retrenchment (Pierson 1994) or alteration. This constituency's growth and

extension into the middle-class decreases the chances of fundamental change (cf. Mahoney and Schensul 2006). By voting for a program, legislators become more committed supporters, even those who have agreed to it as a compromise become politically invested. Executive bureaus running a program also typically gain resources and power over time. The Social Security Board has been regarded an especially powerful domestic bureaucracy in the US setting, and legislation establishing the old-age programs was enacted in 1935 and upgraded in 1939. Part of the idea behind the upgrade was to gain greater support for the national part of the program by increasing the number of current beneficiaries. All the same, although the policy was changing and the target moving, it remained easily within reach at least until 1950, when amendments buttressed the social insurance component.

Deep knowledge and interpretation as data

Addressing the impact of the Townsend Plan centered on answering counterfactual questions. The challenge was to demonstrate that specific consequences in social policy would not have happened in the absence of the challenger and its collective action. Scholars sometimes simply assume that challengers cause outcomes they seek, but often other actors and conditions may also influence outcomes beneficial to the constituencies of challengers. For instance, US programs benefiting the aged may have come as a result of the Depression or the rise to power of the Democratic Party rather than the Townsend Plan. To assess the historical impact of a challenger, scholars can survey the views of participants, contemporary observers, and historians. My key primary sources included congressional debates over the Social Security Act and its amendments; congressional committee minutes on the investigation of the Townsend Plan; contemporaneous reports of key actors; their published recollections; governmental statistics; archived traces of Townsend Plan activity; the Townsend Plan newspapers; and the national press. Following these paper trails

helped to address the counterfactual questions in several ways. Policy-makers often indicated what they were planning before the Townsend Plan existed and before it had engaged in various actions. I could ascertain whether the Townsend Plan induced changes in proposals and in which directions. I could also trace whether such strategies as efforts to endorse congressional candidates influenced members of Congress to act differently from what partisan or regional affiliations would imply.

I had to start almost from scratch, however, as the historiography had many gaps, a chronic problem in studying social movements (Tilly 2006). There was only one extensive extant account of the Townsend Plan (Holtzman 1963), which was limited by being a political science treatment in an era in which social movements were not expected to be influential. Neither was historical chronology one of the goals. I had to ascertain many basic facts about the organization, its strategies, and changes over time by way of inspecting its newsletter and the other archival material available, some of which had not previously been inspected. By the end, I was reasonably certain that no living being knew any more about the Townsend Plan, the pension movement, and their campaigns than I did, and a handful knew as much about the development of Social Security and US old-age policy in its formative years. This in itself was not enough to appraise my theoretical claims in ways that social scientists would find plausible or develop theory.

I focused on the main campaigns of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement, and the many episodes of old-age policy-making. I systematically analyzed whether the movement was influential and, if it was, what it was about its actions made it so, in each of the campaigns and episodes. Analyses of the political process in the development of legislation helped in establishing the challenger's impact. I traced whether a challenger altered the plans and agendas of political leaders, influenced the content of the proposals as devised by executives, legislators, or administrators, influenced the

votes of representatives on key legislation, or influenced the implementation of laws. These interpretive decisions were informed by selected 'most similar' comparisons, such as between the pension movement and other social spending challengers, including Huey Long's Share Our Wealth, veterans' and unemployed workers' organizations. I also compared Old-Age Assistance with Aid to Dependent Children, a similarly structured program. The answers to the counterfactual questions about the campaigns and episodes of policy-making became the dependent variable of my study – a series of results that were largely interpretations of historical episodes.

Making the case

I wanted to make sense of the pattern of influence of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement at these moments and places. I had some variation here. The Townsend Plan contended for an extended period of time and employed almost every strategy short of armed revolt – from letter-writing and educational campaigns to initiative drives and the launching of a new political party – at different levels of mobilization in many different political contexts. I traced these changing efforts to turn policy into senior citizens' pensions over multiple rounds of the policy process, as old-age policy was altered over time and thus changed the possibilities for further influence. These episodes helped to appraise my larger model about matching strategies and political contexts. It also gave me an opportunity for process tracing and congruence appraisals (George and Bennett 2005 Chapters 9 and 10), as I was able to examine one by one changes in resource mobilization, political contexts, and framing and political strategies. The evidence suggested that these single-factor explanations were incongruent with the pattern of influence and instead provided some support for my arguments about matching strategies and contexts (Amenta 2006, conclusion). I also collected Old Age Assistance data across states and voting data on old-age policy in Congress and engaged with coauthors in some

quantitative analyses (Amenta et al. 2005) that helped to confirm my claims. These efforts were pretty much out of the King et al. (1994) playbook (see also Amenta 1991), but did not much help in explaining the transformations that I was most interested in.

I also sought out key, transformative episodes for explanation and the conditions under which unusual outcomes were possible. I was looking both at the national and at the State level – where radical attempts were more likely. I sought to ascertain the conditions under which States were willing to dump the means-tested model in favor of generous and widespread pensions. I also asked about what would make national political leaders support pensions. I became especially interested in one episode of national policy-making. In 1941, the Townsend Plan and the pension movement almost converted US old-age policy into one based on universal pensions for senior citizens. President Roosevelt and the Democrats in Congress had agreed to allow the passage of a universal pension of $30 per month as part of a revamped Social Security program. All signs suggested passage of this legislation in early 1942; it was going through similar steps and was receiving contemporary political commentary in the press in ways analogous to the amendments to the Social Security of 1939. But the US was bombed into the Second World War, upgrades in social policy left the political agenda (Amenta 2006 Chapter 6), and configurations in Congress quickly turned conservative after 1942.

Still, this near miss was of considerable theoretical interest. The movement reached the brink of transforming old-age policy; the reasons for it not happening were largely accidental. A series of conditions suggested by the political mediation model seemed necessary to reach this point. The framing of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement was fairly consistent and remained plausible – perhaps even more so given that the administration was adopting a 'spending solution' to the Depression (Brinkley 1996) in consonance with the Townsend Plan's call for stimulating the economy. Its resource mobilization remained reasonably high with

revenues and membership reaching a secondary peak after dropping back in 1937. More important, the Townsend Plan was able to organize more extensively in the East and Midwest, where it was previously lacking in Townsend clubs, buttressed by State-level pension organizations in the West, and thus the movement was finally organized nationwide. The political alignment was also fairly favorable, with a left-center Democrat remaining President with large, if no longer overwhelming, majorities in Congress. The Townsend Plan was plausibly engaged in its most assertive brand of action, working for the election a large contingent in Congress in the 1940 elections, including both Republicans and Democrats. However, many of these favorable conditions were also there in 1939, when it was possible for the movement to have influence, but not to transform old-age policy.

Two new aspects were based on previous events and processes of learning within the organization and depended on prior political developments. The Townsend Plan had ended its tilt toward the Republicans. In a legislative maneuver designed to do that in 1939, the Democratic House leadership allowed a vote on a Townsend-sponsored bill. In the bill's overwhelming defeat it transpired that many Republicans supported Townsend pensions because they believed they would never come to a vote; in the 1940 campaign the Townsend Plan sought to force such Republican 'traitors' from office and supported more Democratic challengers. Its electoral activity, while seemingly similar, became far more forcible. More important, the Townsend Plan achieved a rapproachement with the Roosevelt administration. The new organizational leader of the Townsend Plan, Sherman Bainbridge, was a longstanding ally of the Townsend-supported Sheridan Downey, a Californian who was one of the Senate's most reliable New Dealers, and similar alliances were effected with others, notably Florida's Claude Pepper. Townsend quit criticizing Roosevelt, who reciprocated, no longer disparaging the pension movement's ideas as 'fantastic,' and was willing

to override the resistance of his own Social Security Board to pensions. The Townsend Plan's congressional delegation was also granted autonomy from the organization to cut deals. For the first time, an alliance based on political strength was forged between the pension organization, the President, and the ruling Democratic leadership. The regime was pro-social policy, but now also favorably disposed to the organization.

Using formal qualitative methods

With coauthors (Amenta et al. 2005), I also engaged in both quantitative and formal qualitative analyses. Despite similar federal incentives for all states to create old-age assistance programs, they did not converge in their generosity and coverage. Thus old-age assistance programs varied widely, and the pension movement sought to convert them into pension-like programs in which benefits would be generous and coverage would be widespread. Political contexts in States also varied widely – some polities had structural hindrances, but those that did not often varied greatly in more recent developments. These analyses pooled all observations at the State level from the inception of the program in 1936 until 1950, when the Social Security Act was amended to make the insurance model supreme. We examined a large number of cases and controlled for other variables that might also have influenced old-age policy, such as left party regimes, powerful domestic bureaucracies, favorable public opinion, and economic and demographic developments. We also examined key old-age votes, focusing on 1939, the year that the Social Security Act was amended and which universal and more generous pensions also came up for votes in Congress. These analyses were deeply informed by the history of the case and the rhythms of social movement campaigns and policy-making.

Although the quantitative techniques found the influence of the pension movement on both outcomes in expected ways (Amenta et al. 2005), the analyses were limited to single factors or minor interactions. These analyses

also placed the usual limitations on cases noted by Abbott (1992b), as they converted 48 stories into about 400 'cases,' or observations, with the usual unrealistic simplifications of the explanation. I was most interested in the extreme cases of states where benefits were highly generous and relatively unrestricted. I also wanted to understand and explain why 17 senators voted for the Lee amendment, which would have replaced the current old-age policy with pensions of the type supported by the movement. My best guess was that several structural, medium-term, and short-term conditions would have to converge. The methods of fsQCA seemed ideal to address these sorts of questions and appraise this multifaceted argument. Although accounting for these unusual outcomes was not the same thing as explaining a major policy shift at the national level, the analyses were consonant with understanding the conditions under which major shifts in policy were possible.

My political mediation model included both long-term and more short-term political developments. Two large-scale political structural situations were important. One was the disfranchisement of much of the less well off South near the turn of the century. A second process was the establishment of patronage-based traditional political parties largely in the Northeast and Midwest, also mainly after the Civil War. I expected that challengers like the Townsend Plan would have grave difficulty organizing in underdemocratized polities and high hurdles in the patronage based polities, and difficulties in gaining support from political leaders in these polities even where they managed to organize. These presumptions were supported. In the shorter run, the simultaneous processes of organizing the aged and swinging state and local Democratic Party organizations behind the national New Deal and gaining power would promote old-age breakthroughs. But also necessary was extensive and recent assertive action through electoral processes by the pension movement, either in congressional elections or through initiative processes. The movement was expected to be less influential

where it endorsed a successful candidate if the movement was unable to back that candidate with extensive organization.

The initial results on both Senate voting and where states stood on benefits supported the political mediation arguments. Perhaps most interesting were the Senate results, which were analyzed by way of crisp sets, given the ordinal nature of most of the measures, and focused on the combinations where positive votes were simply possible. Senators in democratized polities and not dominated by patronage-oriented parties that had a Democratic or radical third party affiliation in a state that was well organized by the pension movement and that received the Townsend Plan endorsement provided the greatest support for the radical amendment (see Amenta et al. 2005). There were two other combinations for which support was possible, but these did not cover many cases. But applying QCA to medium-N datasets has additional value for those focused on cases – an unusual situation given the standard division of labor between social scientists who analyze datasets and those who do not.

We reflected theoretically on cases that did not quite fit, addressed additional potential determinants, and better situated cases. The initial analyses made us rethink what 'democratized' meant, as Florida, a case counted first as underdemocratized given its lower voting participation and status as a former member of the Confederacy – the usual means of categorization – seemed inappropriate. The State combined a well-democratized south with an underdemocratized north and had recently repealed its poll tax. Both of its senators were pension supporters as was a significant fraction of its House delegation – the only place in the South for which this was true – leading us to use the poll tax as the main measure of democratization. We also added measures from other perspectives on the development of social policy, such as high public opinion for a national pension; at the same time, we combined into one measure theoretically similar factors, such as the movement being well organized and

offering an endorsement. The public opinion measure joined in the major combination and added to the explanation, but was not enough to cover the outcome. It would take more influences than previously theorized to secure such votes in circumstances where the administration was opposed to such a bill. Examining more closely the states where pensions were generous revealed different pathways to that point. Colorado organized, campaigned, and won high pensions very quickly through a referendum, which merely had to be defended later; in California the process was drawn out, involving referendums, but mainly failed ones.

What it was a case of?

As I was nearing the end of the study, I thought more about what sort of case this case was, an analytical advantage of case studies often left unexploited. The social movement literature is based on case studies, but scholars tend to view their cases as typical – to paraphrase the Townsend Plan slogan, every movement a Middletown – and expect that broad explanatory claims should apply all movements, possibly following McAdam's (1982) influential analysis of the US Civil Rights movement. Its theoretical model was posited to apply to all movements regardless of how unusual that one might have been. Although there has been much subsequent debate over what constitutes a social movement, the casing issue has mainly been neglected. The consequences of social movement literature, following Gamson (1975), has taken a slightly different approach, placing cases into one of four categories, based on whether they gained new advantages and whether they were accepted by opponents.

I realized that the Townsend Plan did not readily fit anywhere into this two-by-two scheme. One off-diagonal case, 'co-optation' fit somewhat in that the Townsend Plan was not nearly 'successful' in gaining what it demanded and achieved some acceptance, with its many political allies. In States where pension organizations won, such as in Colorado and California, they ultimately lost

because the insurance model won out at the national level. But the Townsend Plan and the main pension organizations were not co-opted in the standard sense; they never gave up principles to have their leaders incorporated into national positions. The movement died off, but not mainly because it was 'preempted,' with political officials winning over a movement's supporters by conceding just enough to win their allegiance. The movement largely imploded on its own. Nor was it just another failed displacement organization, seeking to replace its opponents or the economic or political system, which tend to doom any challenger in a democracy. The Townsend Plan sought to displace only a policy. Also, this was a wide movement with a dominant national organization, rather than just simply a challenging organization. The exercise suggested that the relevant characteristics of movement consequences went beyond success and failure along these dimensions; it was better to think of movements seeking substantial change by ways of their degrees of influence and continued leverage.

From this way of thinking, the US pension movement was a political movement with far-reaching aims that was highly influential, if not successful, and that took another form later with new organizations. In this way, the pension movement had much in common with some other US political movements in the middle of the twentieth century, notably the first feminist movement, the anti-alcohol movement, the nativist movement, and anti-war movements. It was somewhat less similar to movements that gained influence but with more long-term leverage and continuous organizational presence, such as the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the second feminist movement, and the environmental movement. It seems quite possible that any generalizations from my study might apply best to the far-reaching, influential, died-off sort of movement and to require modification to apply to influential movements with more consistent leverage.

Any analysis of the impact of a social movement on policy is also an analysis of policymaking, and this leads to the second

advantage of casing. Cases can be cases of more than one thing. Thus I found it worthwhile to reflect back on the case of policymaking here. The establishment of Social Security, which in many accounts was inherent in the 1935 legislation, was instead a kind of compromise that no one envisioned or wanted. The initial policy as designed hastily by the Committee on Economic Security was at best muddled and at worst contradictory, securing only the principle that poverty in old-age need to be addressed by the national government. Major administrative players fought over the ideas and goals behind old-age policy, notably whether it should be social insurance or a guaranteed income for the poor. Although the more conservative and less powerful Social Security Board was losing initially, it was the main domestic administrative body left standing after the dismantling of the Work Projects Administration and the National Resources Planning Board during the conservative rise to power after the 1942 elections. The Board saw old-age insurance as the entering wedge of a complete social insurance system, but that did not come close to passing Congress. The political organizations of business fought unsuccessfully for a kind of minimalist/non-national model on the order of health policy. The pension movement had its own vision that was realized only in part, only in a few places, only briefly, but formed the main political impetus driving the process.

CONCLUSION

To gain a deep knowledge of a subject matter and making theoretical sense of issues surrounding timing, sequence, and configuration, historical social scientists have turned more and more to case studies and the well-known problems of how to make arguments convincing. Historical social scientists nowadays seek something less general than Barrington Moore, heroic in the broadness of claims and shallowness of source material, based on in-depth knowledge. Indeed, scholars may become so focused on developing an adequate explanation that they may not theorize outside the parameters of the case.

But historical case studies of transformative periods also open the way for new theorizing that employs configuration and time-order claims in ways that combine structures and events. From adequate explanations of individual episodes of major social change addressing issues of structure, action, and contingency, it is possible and worthwhile to distill arguments suitable for application to other cases. There seems to be no disadvantage to doing so. Although misunderstanding or being ignorant about basic information surrounding a case may ruin a study, being wrong is no major problem for a theory, which serves mainly a guide and a challenge to other scholars.

There are other advantages to the new approach. Historical social scientists may also be able to develop datasets that aid in answering more important questions than simply explaining variance. They can deploy their deep knowledge not simply to provide the sorts of extra observations often deemed lacking in case studies. Social scientists can also strategically analyze in detail the circumstances surrounding structural transformations and allied extraordinary occurrences. I examined national votes to transform old-age policy and campaigns in states that sought to convert means-tested benefits into universal pensions. Formal qualitative methods have developed to the point that social scientists can both test extant arguments and suggest compelling alternatives. When applied in an iterative way, these methods can also help scholars make better sense of their cases. Historical sociologists like other qualitative researchers can also innovate in their casing strategies and advance their more sophisticated forms of theorizing. Once one's case is understood, it takes only a cursory knowledge of other cases to address the question of what the case is a case of. The answers can help to set scope conditions around sophisticated theoretical arguments and guide research on similar cases.

It remains true that the academic returns to social scientists for the labor expended

into knowing a case well are relatively minor. I was able very quickly to publish a couple of articles in the two top sociology journals about the causes and consequences of the Townsend Plan. Empirically, the studies were based on multivariate analyses of data gleaned from secondary sources, government documents, and hasty searches through primary documents on the organization. I otherwise leaned on the main secondary source for my information, without knowing, as I learned later, such basic things as that back in the day almost everyone called the organization and phenomenon the 'Townsend Plan' and not the 'Townsend Movement.' In one paper, I relied on the one-size-fits-all propositions from the movement literature and thus neither developed a deep knowledge of the case nor thought outside the general linear box. I wanted to get to know the subject thoroughly some day, but in the meantime was well on my way to a successful tenure review. By contrast, writing the book and engaging in quantitative analyses with greater validity, more interesting outcomes, and more sophisticated ideas about causality took a long time, and the book came out more than a decade after the original articles. Its generation cost countless hours at the New York Public Library and archives around the country, as well as microfiche-related eye strain. I amassed a lot of information, mainly notes from said archives and microfiche, that I could not publish.

All the same, the academic rewards for publishing monographs that combine deep understanding of cases with sophisticated theoretical thinking remain high. And, despite the decline in the market for books, top academic presses remain eager for such work. Young social scientists can still earn tenure and established ones can earn promotions by publishing these books. Much knowledge about cases can be imparted between theory-heavy introductory and concluding chapters. No doubt fewer Barrington Moore Jrs will walk among us, but if more scholars young and old take history seriously in both senses social science will be the empirically and theoretically richer for it.

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