

A Brief Cognitive and Writing Guide for the Social Sciences

As social scientists we think and theorize about the world in certain ways. This way of engaging the world, then, structures the kinds of questions we ask and the methods we use to answer them. Still, there is one goal of inquiry that underlies all theory and method in the social sciences, and this is best explained by the historian and theorist Marc Bloch, whose work has come to define in large part contemporary historiography: "[I]n the last analysis it is human consciousness which is the subject-matter of history. The interrelations, confusions, and infections of human consciousness are, for history, reality itself (1953:151).

Bloch's declaration leads me to ask: first, what can ideas tell us and why? Secondly, how can the social scientist cognitively approach his/her task? In answer to the first, Bloch, in his classic *Feudal Society*, illustrates that ideas are grounded in and profoundly the product of the social structure (i.e., the bonds of interaction between individuals and groups) of a given time and place. Sociologists, specifically, focus on the dynamic interaction between the individual (agency) and structure (Abrams 1994 [1982]).

In answer to the second question, I will again refer to Bloch: "The spectacle of human activity which forms its particular object is, more than any other, designed to seduce the imagination—above all when, thanks to its remoteness in time and space, it is adorned with the subtle enchantment of the unfamiliar" (1953: 8). In other words, we need to move beyond our own limited experiences and perceptions and imagine other possibilities and conceptions as structured by varied historical, cultural, and geographical spaces.

Ultimately, the purpose of the social sciences is very much dependent on this ability to imagine beyond our own time and culture-bound experiential limitations. Otherwise, we will be blinded to the great variety of human interaction, and being able to explain variation is the key to understanding social systems, as for example feudalism or capitalism. The same argument also applies historically. We need to be able to visualize social existence in earlier periods of history, for the distant and not-so-distant pasts—because of long-term processes (*La Longue Duree*, according to the historian Fernand Braudel) of change—are implicated in the present and future.

References Cited

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