THE DECLINE OF METHODOLOGICAL ORTHODOXIES:
How Description and Theorizing Are Reinvigorating Social Inquiry
[Memo]

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Reader's Note: This memo contextualizes my presentation drawn from longer paper that I also uploaded. The paper follows up on ideas in my forthcoming book *The Grammar of Time: A Toolbox for Comparative Historical Analysis* (2023). [For summary of the book see here] *The Grammar of Time* offers a methodological synthesis of CHA and highlights its dual attention to exploratory, descriptive elements of social inquiry, in which historians excel, and the more formal, causal inference techniques, which pre-occupy most social scientists. CHA integrates these descriptive and explanatory elements through a process that variably is referred to a theorizing, inductive iteration, or abduction. The paper explores the role that description plays in theorizing. Replications play a central role in theorizing because they draw attention test anomalies, outliers, confounders, and, more generally, new inductive insights. Replications thus require *re-describing* existing theories to update the explanations they offer. The paper use replications expansively to include not just replicating experiments or statistical tests, but also historiographical debates. It also claims that replications themselves should be viewed as exercises of ontological triage. Any social inquiry employs theories and methods that rest on distinct ontological assumptions. These assumptions determine how complex, static, linear the world is that scholar generate before they set out to explore it. They also become the major source of bias for any inferences drawn. Social scientists refer to these biases varyingly as confounders, endogeneity problems, black boxes that limit the internal and external validity of any results. The principal goal of replications is to identify such causal biases and then use these inductive insights to re-describe existing theories. Replications looks for causal biases by engaging in ontological triage—taking initial causal or descriptive inferences and then evaluating them in different world. Ontological triage thus involves the de-complexification or re-complexification of the ontological assumptions employed in an earlier analysis. To understand this ontological triage the paper develops a more nuanced ontological vocabulary and develops an ontological map. My presentation will concentrate on this ontological map and how it helps us understand the role description plays in broader social inquiry. The rest of the memo includes the relevant section of the paper while the rest of the paper demonstrate the utility of this ontological map to better understand the role description plays in variance-based and historiographical replications. This draft still is very exploratory and thus far from being fully worked out. Your forbearance and feedback therefore are welcomed.

At an abstract level, the idea of ontological triage—the de-complexifying and re-complexifying the worlds against which we validate causal and descriptive inferences—is not too difficult to understand. We talk about the importance of contextualizing, looking for confounders, opening black boxes, specifying causal mechanisms, assessing external and internal validity, or employing multi-method research. Such research advice always involves cross-checking results against worlds with varying complexity—world that are either more or less homogeneous; more or less static. At a more concrete level, however, this advice is more difficult to apply to actual research practices because social science textbooks treat ontology dichotomously by juxtaposing homogeneity with heterogeneity, linearity with none-linearity, nomothetic with idiographic approaches or positivism with interpretivism. This dichotomous treatment of ontologies—just like the distinction between scoring and scouting—is analytically too blunt to capture the actual research practices, and to fully understand the role ontological triage plays in generating reliable knowledge. What is required therefore is a closer look at ontology—the assumptions informing scholars about what sort of social reality they construct before setting out to conduct empirical research. Ontology is the epistemological equivalent of religion and politics at Thanksgiving dinners—let us not talk about it to preserve family peace. It is further hushed up by its technical labels—conditional independence and unity homogeneity—that complicated understanding how ontological assumptions precisely construct social realities. This section therefore expands on how such ontological assumptions shape social inquiry and the contributions made by description. It does so in two steps.

First, it unpacks these two ontological building blocks—conditional independence and unit homogeneity—by clarifying the two dimensions of social reality they obliquely reference: history and geography. Explicating this connection clarifies the role these two assumptions play in constructing the social reality that scholars set out to create and how orderly they presumed them to be.

Second, the section illustrates how textbook methodologists prefer ontological orthodoxies, that dichotomize generalizations and overlook abduction. They construct worlds that either are orderly, thanks to backgrounding history and geography, or conceptualize worlds made disorderly by foregrounding historical and geographic particularities. By contrast, folk methodologists, residing mostly in comparative historical analysis, like to operate in a semi-orderly world neither stripped of complexities or overwhelmed by them; they espouse an ontological heterodoxy in which ontological assumptions are selected ex post to align with whatever research questions is being asked; and they end up treating ontology an ordinal rather than dichotomous manner. Third, this section elaborates this ordinal treatment of history by differentiating between cyclical, bounded, serial, and eventful history as well as the ordinal treatment of geography by talking about physical, bounded, and cultural geography. I used the ordinal treatments of history and geography to create an ontological map that explicates more fully the relationship between abductive, frequentist and historical generalizations.

Ontological Building Blocks: Labeling the construction of history and geography as conditional independence and unit homogeneity obfuscates how profoundly these assumptions

shape how we conduct our research and how we generalize. So let me first explicated more fully how these two technical, experience-distant terms reference history and geography.

Conditional independence backgrounds history by stipulating that the value of any measurement is independent from earlier measurements. The speed of a train, for example, is unaffected by the speed of an earlier train. This independence allows treating each measurement as a single snapshot without having to understand the larger historical process in which it is embedded. (Hall 2003; Hanson and Kopstein 2005; W. Sewell 1996) It stipulates a de facto simultaneity of all observations that permits ignoring dates and the past to understand the present. More broadly, conditional independence stipulates not just the simultaneity of measurements and causal factors and thus allows ignoring the sequence in which they unfold and the historical context in which they occur. Conditional independence translates into a notion of history that is cyclical and historyless. A constantly repeating history is history-less because the present merely repeats what happened in the past, and the future will repeat what occurred in the present. History become cyclical and devoid of change as the past is indistinguishable from the present. To use a widely used metaphor, history becomes frozen, largely absent and turns into a "perennial now". (Eliade 1949, 85) And so explaining history becomes as straight forward as explaining the change of seasons; they just happen and once their change has been explained, it is explained in perpetuity.

Unit homogeneity, in turn, backgrounds geography by stipulating that the units of analysis used to gather evidence are, despite their geographic differences, sufficiently uniform so that we can infer from aggregate causal effects, that have been observed across all cases, the workings of uniform causal mechanisms present in individual cases. (Hall 2003; Hanson and Kopstein 2005; W. Sewell 1996) Unit homogeneity stipulates a de facto contiguity where all observations occur in the identical location thus eliminating any geographic particularities. It assumes a cosmopolitan world so flattened by technology and globalization that cultural, physical, and geopolitical particularities fade into the background. The social world is conceptualized analogously to the physical world: so devoid of cultural and historical contexts that geographic coordinates and zip codes can be ignored. Geographic contexts, to the extent that they differ, are independent of each other so no geographic diffusion could confound the uniformity of a specified spatial unit of analysis. Geography therefore becomes uniform, context independent and thus frozen. (Hall 2003; Hanson and Kopstein 2005; W. Sewell 1996)

There are two ways these two assumptions are used to construct social reality: a dichotomous and orthodox way informing frequentist and historical generalizations and ordinal, heterodox way informing abductive generalizations.

Categorical Treatment of Ontology: The methodological writing paying attention to ontology treats it in a dichotomous manner by stipulating a clock-like nomothetic world that meets conditional independence and unit homogeneity, and thus becomes static and homogeneous enough to be analyzed through experimental and variance-based methodologies. It is juxtaposed with cloud-like, idiographic world that fails to meet these conditions and thus becomes disorderly and complex and thus requires more interpretivist or historical modes of inquiry. This ontological dichotomizing thus becomes the basis existing methodological orthodoxies.

Ordinal Treatment of Ontology: Comparative historical analysis, IR constructivists, abductive analysis in sociology have long tried to carve out an ontological middle ground between VBA's overly frozen world and the historians' overly liquid world. These approaches opt for an ordinal treatment of ontology in which history and geography have multiple ontological viscosities: history can be cyclical, bounded, serial, or eventful, and geography becomes physical, bounded, or cultural. This ordinal treatment of ontology is crucial for understanding ontological triage and the role description plays in updating theories. Let me draw on CHA to illustrate this ordinal treatment of ontology.

CHA is first and foremost problem driven, thus reliant on exploration and skeptical about ontological orthodoxies—both of the statistical and historical kind. Its traces its origins back to the 19th century when scholars like Marx, Weber, Durkheim explore the advent of capitalism, bureaucratic nations states, liberal democracy and modern warfare, as well as more recently trans-national phenomena, legacies of colonialism, and changes in gender, race and other identities. (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005; Møller 2016) It predates the famous late 19th century Methodenstreit and the mid-20th century behavioral revolutions that dichotomized social science into ontologically orthodox camps. It also prioritizes macro-historical questions whose complex causal processes cannot not easily be shoehorned the linearity assumptions of statistical thinking or the exceptionalist inclinations of historical thinking. Several scholars have seized on CHA's preference for ontological heterodoxy. Arguably, the first ones to make this ontological heterodoxy CHA's defining feature were Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers. Their 1980 landmark article "The Uses of Comparative History in Macro-Social Inquiry" (Skocpol and Somers 1980) which identified three different strands of CHA each making different ontological assumptions, allowing CHA to explore different questions at different stages of the research process. Others have expanded on their analysis and become more explicit about the ontological underpinnings of these different strands of CHA. (Abbott 1988; Hall 2003; W. Sewell 1996) The central take-away of these contributions is linking abduction to a more ordinal and hence heterodox treatment of ontology—a heterodoxy deemed to be essential to properly align methodologies with research questions.

CHA differentiates between four types of history: cyclical, bounded, serial and eventful.[1] I already described *cyclical history* as the history that conforms fully the assumptions of conditional independence. It is in effect a history-less history that conforms to older religious notions of history where the past continuously repeats itself, oscillating between rise and falls that can teach us universal moral lessons. (Toulmin and Goodfield 1965) It survives in economics discussion of business cycles. (W. H. Sewell 2008) *Bounded history* is used by what Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers called the macro-causal tradition within CHA. (1980) Macro-causal theories advanced historically bounded explanations to account for phenomena like varieties of capitalism, welfare state regimes, or other cross-sectional, categorical differences. History here serves to elongated causal chains and avoid what Paul Pierson called journalistic or rational choice

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[1] These four notions of history are draw from chapter 2 of "The Grammar of Time".

short/short explanations. (2003) Bounded history also appears in discussions of historical boundary conditions that are invoked to qualify the external validity of test results. Such conditions stipulate that, within a given period, history is static enough to not confound causal inferences drawn from data collected within that period. (Lieberman 2001) Scholars invoking such conditions recognize that history is frozen for some periods but not so frozen that the past is never different from the present. Historical boundary conditions serve a methodological purpose as the scholars invoking them are *not* interested—as regular historians would be—in the qualitative differences between two adjacent historical periods. *Serial history* is linked to more structural, even natural, notions of history. The term serial implies analyzing events that are recurring enough to constitute a series but not so recurring that they become cyclical. They are recurring because of statutory timing (e.g., elections, holidays, census dates, recording practices of statistical offices) or none-statutory factors linked to natural history (e.g., seasons, calendars, demographics). They are non-cyclical by forming secular trends that help us understand how the past is related to the present. Their recurring nature makes it possible to compare and measure them most commonly through time series data. It is widely espoused by economic historians, demographers, or evolutionary psychologists who analyze long-run phenomena. (Møller 2016) Finally, *eventful history* refers to the thickest notion of history espoused by card-carrying historians. Its most defining trademark is its interest in reconnecting human events with time, particularly dates, to identify more intimately patterns of change and describing them in terms of continuities and discontinuities. This focus on qualitative changes becomes apparent in its periodizations and discussions about the direction of history. Eventful history constructs such periods by lumping events into chronological containers—periods—based on the recurrence or non-recurrence of certain attributes across multiple, contiguous events. This focus on temporal recurrence patterns is different from the more standard focus on geographically uniformity patterns. Eventful analysis is interested in chronological instead of spatial generalizations. (Kreuzer 2001, 10–11)

CHA also treats geography in an ordinal matter and differentiates between three notions of geography: physical, bounded geography, and geography. *Physical geography* is the geography specified by unit homogeneity; world so uniform that spatial particularities no longer exist and thus can be ignored. Geology does not make any allowance for varieties of geography but instead focuses on variations of uniform elements across space. *Bounded geography* makes some allowances for broad but not universal geographic patterns. It appears in discussions of geographic boundary conditions that are invoked to qualify the external validity of test results. Or it appears in Qualitative Comparative Analysis's (QcA) discussion of equifinality and unifinality. QcA recognizes that geographic particularities make it possible the same outcome in two different set of cases can be explained by different causal factors, thus make those outcomes equifinal. Or, the same causal factors might be present across cases but producing different outcomes, thus making them unifinal. Equifinality and unifinality thus make allowances a world more heterogenous than permitted by unit homogeneity but not so heterogeneous that it becomes impossible to look for geographically bounded generalizations. Finally, cultural geography is the counter-part to eventful history. It unfreezes geography to such a degree that the world become exceptionalist where each

unit of analysis is sui generic, and thickly textured to capture local meanings. It becomes difficult to generalize and the attention therefore shifts to thick, experience-near description trying to convey the meaning a context related to people.

Taken together, these ordinal treatments of history and geography provide the axis for the ontological map shown in Figure 1. The horizontal axis graphs the four types of history—cyclical, bounded, serial and eventful, while the vertical axis differentiates between physical, bounded and cultural geography. It places statistical and historical thinking at the respective ends of frozen-liquid ontology continuum. Description can now be understood as the analytical steps necessary to bridge historical and statistical thinking. Historical thinking starts from world so unstructured, so disorderly, so historically and geographically liquid that description is required to make sense of it before it can be explained. Statistical thinking, in turn, starts from a world so frozen that there is little to explore and describe. The focus instead becomes to test, to evaluate the descriptions embedded in existing theories. To the extent that such testing fails to confirm existing theories, the test anomalies must be brought in dialogue with existing theories. The goal of this dialogue is to re-describe existing theories and update them—a process frequently referred to as abduction. with abductive thinking occupying the middle ground. Abduction is the simultaneous result thawing (i.e. unfreezing) the static and homogeneous theories and concepts employed in VBA in order to update them while also freezing further stories offered by historians to look for new patterns, questions, and inductive insights.
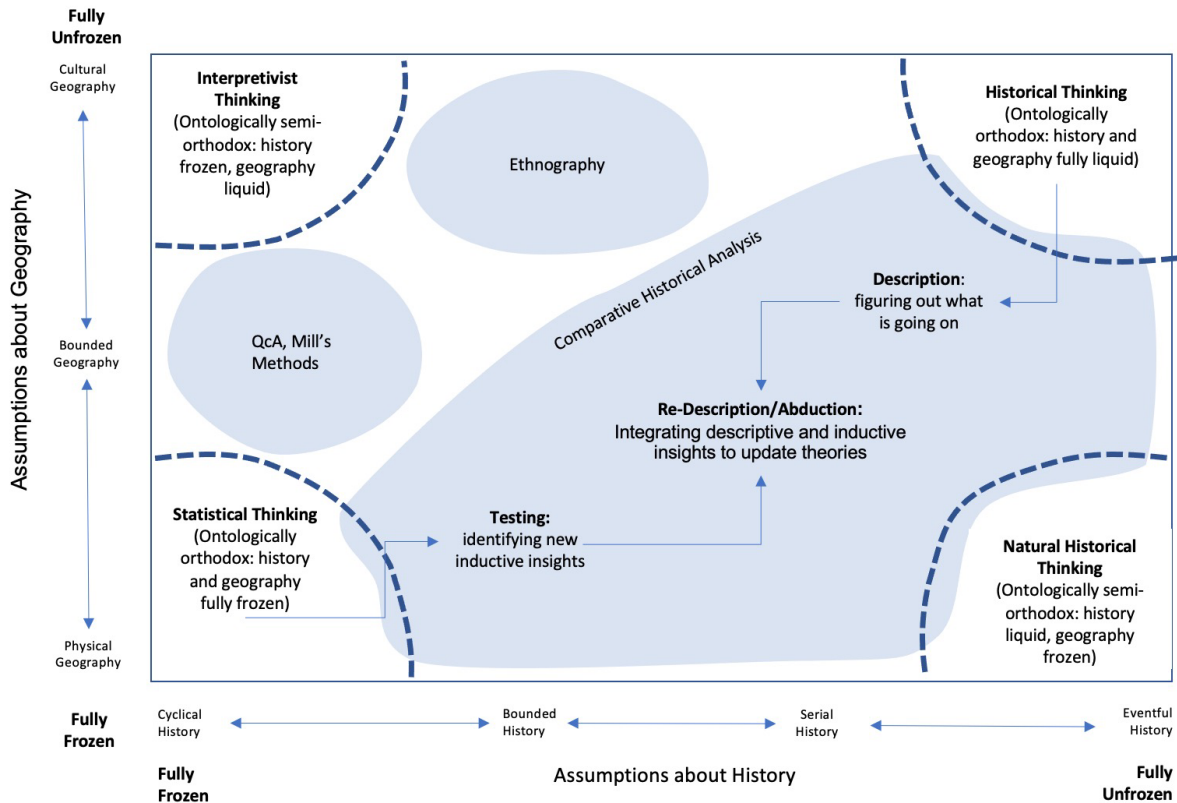
Figure 1: Ontological Map

Modes of social inquiry rest on distinct ontological assumptions about how much to freeze history and geography and thereby pay attention to temporal or spatial particularities. Historical and statistical thinking represent two ideal typical modes of social inquiry that make diametrically opposing ontological assumptions. Abductive thinking builds a bridge between these two modes of analysis and thus occupies the large terrain between them. (Adapted from Kreuzer 2023)

The ontological axis running from the lower left-hand corner to the upper right-hand corner is flanked in the other two corners by interpretivist and natural historical or environmental thinking. These two modes of thinking rest each on their own distinct, hybrid ontological assumptions. Interpretivist thinking unfreezes geography by paying attention to contextual and contingent factors but in the process makes the analysis so microscopic, and snapshot-like that it forgoes studying changes over longer time spans, thus requiring it to freeze history. (Maza 2017, 157–89) Natural historical thinking, in turn, shifts the substantive focus from human, cultural events to environmental, physical phenomena. It thus extends the time from even further into the past than regular history to study bigger, long-run, and more glacially unfolding natural historical processes. (Maza 2017, 108–18) But, this shift to physical phenomena involves treating geography in a more uniform and frozen manner.