

BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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Interviewed by

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Richard Lachmann is a professor in the Department of Sociology of the University at Albany, State University of New York. He completed his B. A. with highest honors at Princeton University and his M. A. and Ph. D. at Harvard University. His research and writing are focused on Political Sociology and Comparative Historical Sociology, especially on the origins of capitalism and the decline of dominant powers. His book *Capitalists in Spite of Themselves: Elite Conflict and Economic Transitions in Early Modern* (2000) won the Distinguished Scholarly publication Award of the American Sociological Association. His early works include a study of New York graffiti published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1988. Lachmann was a visiting professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, China, in 2010, and in 2012 he was also a visiting professor at Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), with the support of the Fulbright Commission. This interview has the objective of introducing the work of Richard Lachmann and also of documenting his time in Portugal.

1. How did you decided to study sociology?

My interest in sociology came out of my leftist political beliefs. I joined in a minor way in political activities but mainly drew from the ferment of the 1970s a curiosity about how the bastards got away with it. Why did soldiers line up to die in imperialist wars? Why did workers put up with bad wages and alienating and dangerous labor? Sociology came closer than other fields — history, economics, anthropology, political science — to addressing those questions. In the US, sociology remains the discipline that is most engaged with those questions and is the most welcoming to leftists. It also is a discipline that allows for broad comparative analysis and also allows me to work on a variety of problems without having to confine myself to a single time period or geographic area as would be the case (at least in the US) if I had become a historian.

2. One of your early works analyzed graffiti, a very visible phenomenon in New York City, as career and ideology. How did you start this work and what do you think about the specificity of graffiti in New York at the time?

As a high school student I took the subway every day to and from school and saw graffiti and wondered who put it up and why. Years later, when I finished my PhD

dissertation I had a few months before I began my first teaching job. I spent that time interviewing graffiti writers and learned how they got involved in graffiti and how their careers developed and in most cases ended. At that time, graffiti was a New York phenomenon and confined mainly to the subways. The ways in which graffiti writers recruited novices and became aware of each other's art depended on their ability to appropriate space on the subways. The art itself was site specific: the graffiti murals affected viewers because of their unpredictable arrival in otherwise bleak and dingy stations and from their ability to create an illusion of movement as they passed behind the girders that hold up the stations. Graffiti survived and spread after it was eliminated from the subways because of its appearance in rap videos that were seen worldwide.

3. History was always important in your sociological analysis. How do you see the relationship between sociology and history?

Sociology began as a discipline to explain historical change, specifically the changes that Marx, Weber and Durkheim believed had just occurred: the transition to capitalism, the origins of rational action, and the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity. Only later did sociology become a general "science of society" focused on the present; however this presentism means that sociology loses the ability to make comparisons across time and it leads to the error of assuming that causal relationships or correlations that are accurate today in one place are universal laws. Historical sociology also has much to bring to history which for the most part is a discipline organized by expertise on a specific place at a specific time. For example history departments hire scholars of the French Revolution or a particular Chinese dynasty. Again, historical understanding gains from comparisons across space and time, and from the effort to try to develop theories that can specify what is common across cases. Sociologists engage in comparisons and theorizing about history much more than historians do.

4. Also comparative work characterizes your research itinerary. Classical authors, such as Durkheim, used the comparative approach but it seems that nowadays sociologists are not so much into this frame of work. How do you think that the comparative method can help us to understand societies?

I think good historical sociology or good non-historical sociology has to be comparative, for the reasons I gave in the previous answer. It is true that most sociologists, especially in the US, are concerned only with their society in the present. The job of sociology is to explain how the particular social arrangements and practices that exist in a certain time and place came to be, and to show how those arrangements are temporary and subject to change. That can be done only by both looking at change over time and by drawing comparisons with other different societies.

5. When we read your texts, we get to know that the renewal of elites is crucial in social change. Can you tell us more about this process?

I think there are two dynamics in each society: conflicts between classes and also conflicts among the elites that make up the ruling class. Elite conflict usually is primary, mainly because elites have more freedom of maneuver. When elites engage in conflict it fractures social structure and creates openings for class conflict. The outcome, the changes in social structure, can only be understood as the result of these two interacting processes of conflict. In my own work I found that capitalism, and the varieties of forms capitalism took in the different cities and states of early modern Europe, were the result primarily of elite efforts to guard their privileges in feudal elite and class conflicts. Capitalism was not planned; it was not the result of efforts to maximize income or power. Rather, it was the inadvertent result of fundamentally conservative efforts to prevent rival elites from undermining existing privileges. Transformative conflict is rare in human history. Those rare moments begin with heightened elite conflict, followed by class conflict.

6. Recently you have been working on the importance of the United States in the world map of forces. Specially, you point out the decline of the US as a dominant power. Can you explain to us the main arguments of this thesis?

US decline is mainly the result of dynamics internal to the country, not to the rise of new competitors or the operation of the world system. Rather, elites within the US have managed over the past decades to increase their ability to appropriate state powers and resources for their own benefit, in large part through mergers that have eliminated older divisions among national and state-based firms.

Their goal is not to shape the overall economy or to formulate programs and policies with national reach. Instead, they seek to appropriate resources from the Federal, and state and local, governments, and to secure laws and regulations that protect their particular interests and profit opportunities from competitors, both foreign and domestic, and to undermine the rights of their customers, clients, and employees.

As a result, a continually growing portion of the Federal budget is allocated to the long-standing claims of existing elites that also enjoy the right to shelter portions of their incomes and assets from taxation. Current examples include: (1) subsidies, water rights, and access to Federal lands for the overproduction of agricultural commodities, (2) the commitment of a sector of the Federal budget to a Medicare drug plan that pays prices significantly higher than anywhere else in the world for drugs developed mainly in Federal or university labs or for copycat drugs designed to extend patents with no medical advantage over older generic drugs, (3) free access to Federal lands for mining, ranching, and logging with no obligation to pay for environmental effects which are then borne by public funds and health, (4) Federal tax and direct subsidies for the export of technology and capital to foreign subsidiaries and customers, and (5) much of the huge US military budget still is spent on weapons systems designed decades ago to fight the Soviet Union. Money is wasted on such useless weapons because aerospace and other firms have the power to ensure those weapons systems still are built.

Together these claims and immunities ensure either growing deficits or, even in times of fiscal stability as in the late 1990's, an inability to finance new public projects for either infrastructure or the development of human capital.

7. We know you are a researcher and also a professor of the Sociology Department at the College of Arts and Sciences (University of Albany). How do you articulate the two activities, teaching and researching?

My main interest is research. I feel I bring the reading and thinking I do in research to my teaching. I am better able to present a coherent analysis of sociology to my students because of my research than I would if I were not a researcher and instead taught out of textbooks, as do many university instructors in the US. For graduate students, my role as a professor is to teach them to become scholars themselves and I can best do that by sharing with them the process of my own research. So teaching and research go together better at the graduate than at the undergraduate level. Fortunately, for faculty like me at research universities the teaching load is relatively low: two courses per semester, which leaves most of my time for research.

8. This year you came to Portugal, to ISCTE-IUL, with the support of the Fulbright Commission. Why did you choose Lisbon to develop your professional activity?

My own work does not address Portugal. I came to ISCTE mainly because of my previous contacts with scholars there, beginning with Lígia Ferro who researches graffiti, a topic I addressed for New York City in the 1980s. I also had visited Lisbon previously and found it a very pleasant and exciting city and wanted to spend more time there. My time living in Lisbon makes me want to return again.

9. What do you think about the state of development of the Portuguese social sciences?

I was very impressed with the Portuguese graduate students. I didn't have contact with undergraduates and so I can't evaluate them. The graduate students are very widely read and have a sophisticated sense of theory and history. They also are better informed about US politics than many American students. The research of graduate students and faculty seems largely focused on Portuguese social issues, but approached in ways that are theoretically sophisticated and that draw comparisons with other countries. The research seems to be closely integrated with the work of social scientists elsewhere in Europe.

10. To finish, could you share your opinion about Portugal's actual social, political and economic situation in the context of Europe and the world?

Portugal, despite the crisis, is permanently part of the EU and Eurozone now and will be limited in its policy and political options by those links. Unfortunately, Portugal is in a very weak position within the EU and in relation to the ECB and IMF

and will not be able to reject the unfair demands for austerity. Nevertheless, there is room for resistance and modification within Portugal. I was surprised that almost all the anger in Portugal against the austerity was focused on government officials rather than capitalists and speculators who still are doing very well. It certainly is possible within the confines of the demands from the EU, ECB and IMF to impose taxes that fall much more heavily on the rich. Most of Europe never has had progressive taxes. (This is one area where the US is, or once was, ahead of most of Europe.) This could and should be a point for mass mobilization. The state also needs to be a target. Many of the current cuts are counterproductive, even in terms of the calculations of reducing budget deficits. Private healthcare is less efficient and more expensive than publically run healthcare (as we well know in the US). Yet the current Portuguese government is trying to privatize health facilities. This is in part blind subservience to neo-liberal ideology and probably also an attempt to create an opportunity for businesses connected to the ruling party to profit. However, none of this actually saves money, and so it can be resisted even within the confines of the troika's demand for austerity.

Another avenue for maneuver comes from Portugal's connections to the relatively vibrant economies of its former colonies, most notably Brazil. European countries, including Portugal, have always benefitted from colonies and neo-colonies, and still can today. (For Germany today, of course, most of Europe is its colony.)

In any case, Portugal remains one of the most socially liberal countries in the world, for example it is one of the first to allow same sex marriage. This is an achievement that can survive even the worst economy. It is encouraging that Portugal, unlike most of the other countries in crisis, has not given rise to a right-wing nationalist or neo-fascist movement. For that reason alone, Portugal's future will be brighter than that of Spain or Greece.

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