This practical introduction, then, is one that is oriented to graphing low-dimensional distributions and model results. But this notion of graphing bivariate relations as predictions-and-data-points becomes more and more difficult to follow as the number of dimensions increases. There are two ways of responding to this problem. The first, one that many statisticians will favor and that, I think, Healy implicitly leans toward, is to be extremely suspicious of multivariate models and to shake one's head sadly when results from highly leveraged models are interpreted. There is much to be said for this response. It is not only statistically conservative, but it fits a way of doing social science—one that is oriented to crisper questions, more convenient research designs, and proof via visual inspection—that is widely appreciated *outside* of sociology. (If you want to publish in *Science*, say, bivariate relations are often preferred if possible!) However, sociology has a way of thinking, going back to Durkheim's *Suicide*, in which contenders battle it out by adjudicating between possible interpretations of *one* relation between variables by *adding* another variable. We could split the sample, but when the number of contenders gets large, or each brings many variables, then this becomes impracticable. Moving sociology away from this paradigm will not be easy. If Healy thinks this is the way to go, he will need to bang a drum more vigorously than he has done here.

Pushing the field in that direction probably cannot hurt; even if we don't really go there, we need repeated caution about multivariate models. But it seems that it might be a lost opportunity if we were to consider only data sets possessing such elegant simplicity. There is another approach, which is to use visualization to try to better understand the nature of our high-dimensional data *before* attempting to fit models. There is valuable work coming from the computer science realm, broadly understood, on ways of constructing such visualizations, including ones that end up printable in black and white on regular paper. These have their own difficulties and obscurities (for example, the ''perplexity'' parameter for the t-SNE algorithm), but this is probably not the time for sociology to do an about-face and flee multivariate data structures. What we now need is a practical introduction to high-dimensionality data visualization, one that builds on the work here on low-dimensionality data visualization. Healy seems like just the person to do it.

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## What *Should* Historical Sociologists Do All Day? *Starving the Beast*, the Reagan Tax Cuts, and Modes of Historical Explanation

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Monica Prasad, along with collaborators like Isaac Martin and Ajay Mehrotra (e.g., Martin, Mehrotra, and Prasad 2009), has made fiscal sociology—the sociology of taxation—a thriving part of the discipline. Her first book showed how different national patterns of taxation help explain the variable strength of neoliberalism across nations (Prasad 2006). Her second identified progressive taxation as key to producing both democratized credit and a weak welfare state in the United States (Prasad 2012). More generally, her work has been critical for helping us understand how political

institutions shape societal outcomes in lasting, often counterintuitive, ways.

Prasad's latest book, *Starving the Beast: Ronald Reagan and the Tax Cut Revolution*, bears many of the hallmarks of her best work: sweeping purview, ambitious comparisons, systematic testing of competing explanations. It displays an impressive depth of research (opening your book by talking about your six-year wait for FOIA'ed documents is definitely a power move) and breadth of scope (few people can talk so knowledgeably about tax systems across so many countries). It provides a definitive historical account of the Reagan tax cut revolution, and the new archival evidence it draws on gives us rich detail that has been missing from prior narratives.

Yet some parts of *Starving the Beast* are more convincing than others. While one of the book's two main arguments is fully compelling, the other is less completely documented and to some extent even contradicts the first. The competing explanations that are set up—even around the first, generally persuasive argument—have a bit of a straw man feel, and the arguments used to dismiss them sometimes miss the mark. Given that I was convinced by the core empirical account, it took some puzzling to figure out why I was not more fully satisfied with the complete package. Revisiting a widely circulated working paper by Damon Mayrl and Nicholas Wilson, "What Do Historical Sociologists Do All Day? Methodological Architectures in Historical Sociology" (Mayrl and Wilson 2018) helped diagnose the issue: a mismatch between a mode of historical explanation Prasad deploys with aplomb in other work, and turns to in this book as well, and the mode of historical explanation suggested by the body of evidence that appears to have inspired the book.

*Starving the Beast* first and foremost tackles the question of why Republicans—formerly the party of fiscal responsibility—became the party of tax cuts. Drawing on newly released documents from the Reagan archives, it tells an important, complex, and historically nuanced story. In Prasad's account, several factors set the stage for this turn. For decades, Republicans had been searching for a solution to their problem of being a seemingly permanent minority party. While Democrats had achieved success through welfare state clientelism, promising programs for every constituency, Republicans' eat-your-vegetables identity of balanced budgets had proven less appealing to voters. When the inflation of the 1970s intersected with the structure of the U.S. tax system—which, for historical reasons explored elsewhere by Prasad, relied on income rather than sales tax, and had high corporate and capital gains tax rates—a political opportunity opened up.

Since the United States' progressive tax brackets were not indexed to inflation, Americans found their tax rates increasing even if their real income was not, producing growing dissatisfaction. Business, feeling increasing pressure from international competition, also began pushing for more favorable tax treatment. First Jack Kemp and then Ronald Reagan chose to break with the Republican tradition of balanced budgets and effectively seized on tax cuts as a central plank in their platform, leading to the 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), which gave massive tax cuts to both individuals and businesses.

Though Republicans promised that ERTA would not reduce revenues, in actuality it produced record-breaking deficits. But the lesson Republicans learned from ERTA—a lasting one—was that voters didn't really care about deficits. And while perpetuating large deficits would not have been a viable long-term strategy had the rest of the world not been happy to purchase as much debt as Americans wanted to produce, it turned out that the rest of the world was. Given this reality, tax cuts became a hugely successful platform for Republicans, one that returned them to political dominance for the next several decades.

Prasad tells this story in the first two-thirds of her book, but the final third draws on her comparative work to make a second argument: that ultimately, the Republican turn toward tax cuts took place because European governments were more business-friendly. Europe's strong welfare states rested on an environment of low corporate taxes and relaxed regulatory policy, while the United States was surprisingly

punishing to business. Though U.S. business interests pushed for lower taxes, in doing so they were "running to stay in place"—trying to secure the more favorable tax environment their European competitors already enjoyed. From this, Prasad draws several lessons: that we should not overestimate the political power of business in the United States, that tax cuts reflect democratic wishes rather than indicating a lack of democracy, and—an ongoing theme in her work—that successful welfare states rest on business-friendly policies.

Prasad's real strength as a sociologist is in setting up sweeping, counterintuitive macro-causal explanations of unexpected historical outcomes, using comparison (across both nations and policy domains) as a means of building her arguments, and systematically setting up (and knocking down) competing explanations. Her first two books, *The Politics of Free Markets* and *The Land of Too Much*, both feature this sort of puzzle—why did the United States and the United Kingdom end up with more neoliberal policies than France and Germany? why does the United States have an unusually weak welfare state?—and this form of argument, with great success. And part of what makes them not only provocative but *useful* books is that you don't have to be fully convinced by the grand argument to find specific components both compelling and generative. Regardless of whether one agrees that the United States and the United Kingdom turned to neoliberalism because politics in those countries was more adversarial to business, Prasad's identification of different patterns of taxation as key to producing particular kinds of politics is critical. And regardless of whether one is convinced that nineteenth-century agrarian populism played the key role in producing the distinctive U.S. welfare state, her reframing of American politics as unexpectedly hostile to business interests is crucial.

But *Starving the Beast* is different. It has a similar puzzle to be explained: why did the party of fiscal responsibility become the party of tax cuts? But Prasad appears to have been motivated to write the book, at least in my read of the introduction, by a treasure trove of newly available archival documents. The book uses them to provide an account that is sharply articulated and fully supported, but that is not as surprising or counterintuitive as her earlier books. Nor can that account be boiled down to a single line: that the United States and the United Kingdom were unexpectedly adversarial to business, or that early U.S. progressivism unexpectedly produced a weak welfare state. *Starving the Beast* tells a complex, multicausal story, ripe with contingency, individual agency, political skill, and plain old luck. While political institutions and the structural position of the United States in the global economy play a role, it is, more than anything, a *historical* explanation.

This type of explanation maps well onto a particular category in the four-part typology developed by Mayrl and Wilson in "What Do Historical Sociologists Do All Day?" In this creative and thought-provoking paper, Mayrl and Wilson empirically examine all the citations in 37 award-winning books and articles in comparative-historical sociology. Grouping publications by patterns in what kinds of sources they use (primary versus secondary) and in how they use them (critically versus constructively, and in service of their theoretical versus empirical argument), the paper identifies four "methodological architectures" for making sociological claims about the past: the "theoretical frontier," the "sociologist as historian," "macro-causal analysis," and "data-driven theorizing."

Prasad's general approach to historical sociology seems to fit the "macro-causal analysis" category, and indeed, Mayrl and Wilson use *The Land of Too Much* as an archetype: the book "pos[es] and answer[s] a large, sociological question with an equally sweeping argument" and "makes [its] case through periodic comparisons—in this case, with Europe and Canada." It "repeatedly delves into marvelous detail, the chapters peppered with illuminating quotes and apposite illustrations of crucial theoretical points, each lavishly sourced to empirical material." Like other work in this cluster, *The Land of Too Much* "is devoted to building an airtight empirical case for an alternative theory," a technique Prasad excels at.

But both the type of evidence Prasad relies on and the story that *Starving the Beast* tells are better suited to another of Mayrl and

Wilson's architectures: the "sociologist as historian." This approach, they suggest, "is fundamentally distinguished by its source material, drawing heavily on original archival and other primary research." While these works "tend to feature comparisons," "a richly detailed narrative sourced to primary documents dominates the ultimate presentation." With its new archival evidence and its contingent, multi-causal narrative, Prasad's latest book would seem an excellent example of work that reflects "the third-wave call for more extensive engagement with primary sources in ways that blur the boundary between history and sociology." The problem is that Prasad remains committed to the first approach, even when the data might point to the second. This disjuncture leads to some choices in *Starving the Beast* that work less well.[2]

For example, although Prasad's account emphasizes historical complexity, much of *Starving the Beast* is spent knocking down competing explanations for why Republicans turned to tax cuts: 1) the power of big business to advocate for them, 2) the power of ideas (either the Laffer curve argument that tax cuts could increase revenues or, alternatively, that tax cuts would force government to reduce spending), and 3) the racialization of welfare policy undermining support for government. But there are problems here. First, while trying to evaluate the relative importance of different causes is worthwhile, supporting the historical argument of *Starving the Beast* does not really require disproving the possibility that other factors played a role. Second, because the story is not quite as counterintuitive as that of *The Politics of Free Markets* or *The Land of Too Much*, this approach forces Prasad to create

straw men of these competing arguments, making their demolition relatively unsurprising. And finally, because the evidence encourages a focus on the passage of ERTA specifically, the book overlooks ways these factors may have changed the broader environment in which tax politics took place even if they were not immediate, direct motivators for ERTA.

Prasad's argument that business interests did not put tax cuts on the Republican agenda, for instance, focuses too narrowly on the moment Reagan chose to champion tax cuts and in doing so misses other forms of business influence. ERTA has long been understood as the result of an uneasy partnership between a movement focused on large cuts in individual tax rates, of which the business community was skeptical, and business advocacy of corporate tax cuts—in particular, accelerated depreciation (e.g., Stockman 1986). Reagan did not take up the mantle of tax cuts at the behest of business, but this does not mean that the rising influence of organized business interests, and their public case for greater government support in the face of increasing global competition, did not produce an environment favorable to such an alliance (Mizruchi 2013; Waterhouse 2013).

Similarly, *Starving the Beast* discusses at length whether racism caused ERTA but assumes that ERTA supporters must have been more racist than non-supporters, or that white and black voters must have had different preferences for tax cuts, in order for race to have mattered. But you don't need to think that tax cut supporters were especially racist to believe that the 1970s racialization of the welfare state broadly increased skepticism about the value of government in ways that produced a tax-cut-friendly environment. Given that this type of sociologist-as-historian account does not rest on disproving all other competing explanations in order to be convincing, addressing such explanations in a way that did not try (with less than complete success) to dismiss them entirely might have been the better choice.

The macro-causal approach also leads Prasad to draw on her comparative work to argue in the final third of the book that ultimately, the Republican turn toward tax

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2.  Interestingly, in Mayrl and Wilson's paper, *The Politics of Free Markets* falls into the "sociologist as historian" bucket, rather than the "macro-causal analysis" bucket. While the citation patterns of *The Politics of Free Markets* may reflect the heavy reliance on primary sources characteristic of the former architecture, its pattern of argumentation and the scope of its central question (why did neoliberalism proceed further in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Germany and France) appear to me more macro-causal, and it seems like a potential boundary case.

cuts took place because Europe was more friendly to business. Europe's strong welfare states, she contends, rested on a base of low corporate taxes and relaxed regulatory policy, while the United States was surprisingly punishing to business in ways that ultimately led it to challenge this treatment in order to remain competitive in a global market. Yet this part of the argument seems to conflict with the earlier story, in which business is relatively weak, is not an important driver of the Reagan tax cuts, and suffers a significant loss in that it opposes the large individual tax cuts that make up half of ERTA. And because the bulk of the evidence is concentrated in the first two-thirds of the book, the reader does not really have enough information to fully evaluate how convincing the case is. Again, there is a mismatch between the detailed archival evidence that motivates the first two-thirds of the book, with the convincing sociologist-as-historian account that accompanies it, and the macro-causal argument that the book continues to turn to.

As a methodological pluralist, I am a fan of both the grand macro-causal comparisons that Prasad's books have been exemplars of as well as more historical-sociological accounts that emphasize complexity and contingency but retain an eye on social structure. Yet not every historical narrative, nor every sociological puzzle, nor every trove of evidence is equally suited to both types of explanation. There is no single right approach to historical sociology—a single thing that historical sociologists *should* do all day. But whatever it is they choose to do, they will do it best when their empirical material and their style of argument align closely with one another. While *Starving the Beast* can be faulted for putting too much

macro-causal argument atop an otherwise strong historical narrative, the book will nevertheless be essential reading. Prasad has produced a compelling, definitive account of why Republicans became the party of tax cuts, and *Starving the Beast* will doubtless generate future dissertations on the nature of business-state relations in the United States and Europe as well.

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