

A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MODERN SOCIAL SCIENCES



Edited by
Roger E. Backhouse • Philippe Fontaine

A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences

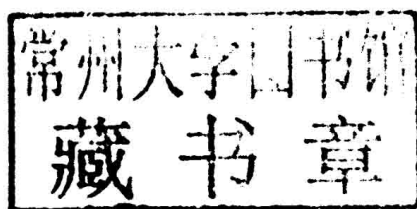
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A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MODERN SOCIAL SCIENCES

A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences includes essays on the ways in which the histories of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science have been written since the Second World War. In drawing together chapters written by leading historians of each discipline, the book reveals significant parallels and contrasts that serve as a basis for a comparative interdisciplinary historiography, in which not only forces specific to individual disciplines but also social, political, and intellectual developments outside are seen to shape the various social science disciplines. The book invites historians, including historians of the different social sciences, who often see them in fragments, to look beyond disciplinary boundaries and to contemplate the possibility of a historiography of the social sciences as a whole.

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Introduction

Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine

The literature on historiography is large and diverse. From characterizing the main stages in historical research to picking out “great men,” from identifying leading schools and main ideas to clarifying the differences between professional and lay historians, from describing what historians write about to explaining their methods, from noting the significance of history for the social sciences to pointing out the usefulness of the social sciences to historians, from writing about what historians actually do to deliberating about what they should do, historiographers carry out an impressive range of activities.

Within a field spanning several millennia and covering numerous geographical areas, it is not unusual to distinguish various forms of historiography according to “temporal and spatial characteristics” (Lorenz 2011, p. 14). As it concerns Western societies since the Second World War, this book remains within that tradition. It offers an illustration of what historians regard as more “particular and concrete” forms of historiography. At the same time, it flirts with more “general and abstract” forms of historiography (Lorenz 1999) in arguing that, because of the commonality of problems facing social scientists after the Second World War, it makes sense to go beyond disciplinary boundaries to contemplate a history of the social sciences as a whole. It also argues that something can be learned about the way the history of history is written from considering the historiographies of the different social sciences within a comparative interdisciplinary framework. The chapters that follow represent the first steps in that direction.

The essential starting point is the rise of the social sciences since the Second World War, covered in the next section, for it provides the background to their increased consideration in the historical literature in the past twenty-five years. In particular, an important part of this history is that the social sciences achieved their more significant place in economic,

political, social, and cultural life, in large part, through cross-disciplinary engagements guided by a common problem-oriented approach. We then turn to the existing historiography, arguing that recent work has laid the foundations for moving from largely disciplinary histories – of psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science – to a history of the social sciences as a whole. This is followed by the central section, in which we argue for a comparative interdisciplinary historiography of the social sciences. In the final section, we explain how the chapters that follow take us toward that goal.

The Rise of the Social Sciences after 1945

It is well known that the natural sciences played an enormous role in the Second World War and that their prestige was greatly enhanced, both in government and in society at large. The atomic bomb and radar were just the most visible results of a research effort that was recognized by those in the military and in government to have been crucial to winning the war (on British developments, see Edgerton 2011), but social scientists were also heavily involved in the war effort (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010a, pp. 186–9). Psychologists played an important role in screening military personnel, dealing with psychological casualties and appraising the enemy (Herman 1995; Capshew 1999). Anthropologists were needed because of their knowledge of many of the societies and cultures in which fighting was taking place, especially in the Pacific (Price 2008). Economists were likewise involved in economic planning, in intelligence, and in a number of activities soon to be identified under the umbrella “operations research” (Mirowski 2002; Guglielmo 2008). The bombing of Pearl Harbor introduced new geographical “realities” that existing maps could hardly render (Schulten 2001) so that American cartography entered a new era, as illustrated by the role of geographers in the Office of Strategic Services (Barnes 2006), which also employed historians. In much of this work, social scientists were working in multidisciplinary teams, alongside natural scientists and engineers.¹

After the Second World War, though some businessmen and politicians objected to peacetime government involvement in science, the natural scientists were able to capitalize on their wartime achievements, especially

¹ Talcott Parsons offered a valuable presentation of the war record of social scientific research in a draft – “Social Science: A Basic National Resource” – submitted to the Social Science Research Council in 1948 and subsequently published with an instructive introduction by Klausner and Lidz (1986, pp. 79–101).

as the Cold War developed. Instrumental to this process was the report *Science: The Endless Frontier* (1945), produced by a committee headed by Vannevar Bush, head of the wartime Office of Scientific Research and Development (for an official history of OSRD, see Baxter 1968 [1946]). This report supported the case for government sponsorship of science by arguing for the importance of new knowledge obtained through basic research as a prerequisite to social progress. It was concerned primarily with the natural sciences, reflecting the lesser authority of the social sciences in the eyes of policy makers at the time. Indeed, while the war had profound effects on the social science disciplines, their practitioners failed to capitalize on their wartime activities in the way that natural scientists were able to do. Strong reservations as to their scientific legitimacy and social usefulness persisted in political and business circles: For some, the phrase “social science” was sufficient to suggest social policy or, even worse, socialism. Thus when the National Science Foundation (NSF) was established, assuring long-term federal support for scientific research, the social sciences were not formally excluded, but they were lumped with “other sciences” so that it was hard for them to get support (Larsen 1992, p. 39). Yet, with problems of human welfare being made increasingly central to the social science enterprise and its gradual endorsement of the “scientific study of man” – an approach that favored the quantitative dimension of social phenomena – by the mid-1950s the social sciences had regained most of their wartime confidence, as illustrated by increased recognition within NSF.²

Increasingly recognized as an important source of new knowledge (notably by private foundations and think tanks), the social sciences played a growing role in shaping the perception of policy makers of society and its problems. As much as they inspired a view of society according to which intervention was not only possible but also desirable, they offered tools that allowed for better-informed decisions and subtler understanding of current societal transformations. The techniques of social science spread through every area of American life. As Dorothy Ross (2003, p. 229) has argued, “The liberal Enlightenment vision of a progressive modern society guided

² On the centrality of human welfare to the social science enterprise, see the *Report of the Study for the Ford Foundation on Policy and Program* – the so-called Gaither Report of 1949. Geiger (1993, p. 104) notes that “American social science was far more vigorous by 1956, and much less in need of reformation, than had been the case at the end of the 1940s.” As noted by Larsen (1992, p. 39), “social scientists were found to be needed at NSF before their programs were judged to be worthy of support.” The role of the sociologist Harry Alpert was central to the recognition of the social sciences at NSF (see Solovey and Pooley 2011).

by science gained energy and urgency from the defeat of fascism, the disintegration of colonial empires, and the threat of communism.” Meeting this challenge required not only the systematic design of policies to transform society – avoiding those that had created economic and social chaos, encouraged the rise of fascism, and strengthened communism in the inter-war period – but also the construction of a scientific approach to human behavior. This need for social science was met by the expansion of higher education and growing support from national governments and foundations, notably Rockefeller and Ford. Countries outside the Soviet sphere imported American models for the organization of science, supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³

It was not just the academic and policy-making elites who ultimately appropriated the results of social scientific research. Though they may not have thought of what they were encountering in this way, members of the public were also exposed to techniques and ideas that originated in the social sciences. To take but a few examples, social surveys, polling, and election studies – developed by sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists – became a part of everyday life (Igo 2007) as much as maps entered the national culture with the help of geographers’ recreation of the world (Schulten 2001). Similarly, it is hard to imagine popular discussions of economic policy without ideas such as “Keynesianism” and “monetarism,” let alone without concepts such as “national income” or “money supply” (Parsons 1990).

If the increasing importance of the social sciences is well known, both to historians and to social scientists themselves, their extensive connections deserve better appreciation. As was mentioned earlier, one aspect of wartime activities was the organization of research into multidisciplinary teams, which continued long after the war’s end. An early example was the Russian Institute, established at Columbia in 1946, but many research institutes and centers were subsequently created to undertake research on the Soviet Union. The creation of cross-disciplinary teams did not stop with area studies – the cross-disciplinary enterprise par excellence. At Harvard, the Russian Research Center coexisted with the Laboratory (and Department) of Social Relations, established in 1946; at Chicago the committee structure encouraged exchanges among social scientists and even between social

³ This draws on Ross (2003, pp. 229–34), which contains extensive references to document these claims. On the attempt by social scientists associated with UNESCO to institutionalize American disciplines on an international scale, see Selcer (2009).

and natural scientists, occasioning various projects such as that of creating an Institute devoted to the mental sciences under the psychologist James G. Miller; at Michigan, Donald Marquis and Rensis Likert helped form or attract to the university a number of cross-disciplinary teams such as the Survey Research Center, the Research Center for Group Dynamics, or the Mental Health Research Institute. This was a time when cross-disciplinary relationships flourished in the social sciences, reflecting a problem-oriented approach in which disciplinary boundaries were unhesitatingly minimized.⁴

However, by the 1970s cross-disciplinary research ventures had largely declined, provoking fears of excessive specialization. Crowther-Heyck (2006) has analyzed this phenomenon through the lens of patronage systems, pointing out that the rise of the system organized around the NSF and the National Institutes of Health, different from the preceding system, played a significant role in the perception of social scientific fragmentation. Another way of looking at the problem is to recall that cross-disciplinary research ventures did not imply the same degree of participation from different social scientists. For instance, when joining multidisciplinary teams, geographers may have been less confident of their added value than were sociologists.⁵ Social scientists did not play the same role either. For example, there were differences between the attitudes of psychologists and economists in that psychology's protean identity allowed for greater flexibility and readier accommodation of other disciplines' demands than did economists'

⁴ Crowther-Heyck (2006, p. 421) notes that there were "nearly 250 new interdisciplinary social science research institutes created in the first twenty years after the war." Abbott (2001, chap. 5) recalls usefully that cross-disciplinary research ventures presuppose disciplines.

⁵ Barnes (2006, pp. 158–9) recalls the difficulties of geographers after the reorganization of the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). While this reorganization, with its new regional geographical focus, should have benefited geographers, it actually penalized them. By compelling geographers to interact with other social scientists and adopt a problem-oriented approach, this reorganization brought out various deficiencies in their training and more generally their inability to translate their skills into the larger cross-disciplinary framework imposed by military intelligence. In his description of geography's wartime service, Stone (1979) emphasizes the need for geographers to cross disciplinary boundaries and to confer with specialists in other disciplines, but minimized geographers' deficiencies in that respect. On the side of sociology, cross-disciplinary contacts strengthened during the war, "continuing a process of interdisciplinarity that had its roots in the movement for the SSRC in the 1920s" (Abbott and Sparrow, p. 294). More importantly, after the postwar campaign for scientific legitimacy (Haney 2008, chap. 2), Parsons was able to place sociology at the center of a cross-disciplinary enterprise, involving both anthropology and psychology, which other sociologists participating in multidisciplinary teams could use as an inspiration.

widespread endorsement of the utility maximization framework. This suggests that despite strong cross-disciplinary interactions within the social sciences during the war and in the two decades following it, disciplinary claims to expertise over various social problems did not disappear though they may have been less perceptible when the cross-disciplinary mood dominated.

When the emphasis shifted away from interdisciplinarity toward specialization, there was some incentive for social scientists to reaffirm their own discipline's expertise in addressing a variety of society's issues. It then became apparent that the authority accorded different forms of disciplinary knowledge varied enormously. That was a side effect of what can be described as an increased segmentation in the analysis of society following the decline of the Parsonian paradigm.⁶ Gradually abandoning the view of society as a functional whole, with its various segments playing an instrumental role, in favor of a conception of society in which they are considered in isolation from each other, social scientists could entertain the belief that the logic of society could be reduced to the working of one of these segments only. Subsequently, it became possible for some social scientists to claim expertise over human behavior in a variety of situations, economic, political, and social, and accordingly to appear as competent analysts of society as a whole. Of course, some social sciences were more successful at this than were others, as illustrated by the psychologization of American society in the 1960s and the increasing dominance of an individualistic economic discourse in Western societies from the 1970s.

Before the Second World War, psychology enjoyed some recognition inside and outside the university, but its growth was circumscribed. After the war, it outgrew the bounds of professionalization and came to pervade most spheres of life (see Herman 1995, chap. 1): it became "a veritable worldview" promising "to satisfy the hunger for values and the desire for affirmation" at a time when traditional beliefs were becoming harder to hold (p. 5). There was an enormous rise in the number of clinical psychologists, therapy achieving a centrality to American life unknown before the war when it had been the preserve of the insane, the affluent,

⁶ Brian Barry (1970 [1978], p. vi) has described part of this development in the context of writing about politics. He notes: "What does seem defunct ... is the notion, introduced by Durkheim and elaborated by Parsons, that the way to explain some feature of a society is to show how it relates to other aspects of the society to form part of a functional whole." This fits well into the story told by Rodgers (2011), though he does not mention Parsons.

and the avant-garde. The popularity of works such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), centered on the study of the American character, and C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951), with its emphasis of a form of social alienation, illustrates the way psychology permeated thinking about the structure of society. Mills went so far as to claim, "We need to characterize American society of the mid-twentieth century in more psychological terms, for now the problems that concern us most border on the psychiatric" (p. xx; quoted in Herman 1995, p. 7).

The increasing dominance of an economic discourse endorsing an individualistic perspective from the mid-1970s culminated with the political revitalization of market liberalism (Kelley 1997; see also Cockett 1995 and Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). It was closely allied to the weakening of a view of society in which individuals were shaped by their place in society, which influenced their life chances, social norms, and even their personalities.⁷ Gradually, individuals were increasingly seen as isolated agents making rational choices. Notions of society fractured, undermining the intellectual basis on which many postwar social institutions rested (Rodgers 2011). The fracturing of the idea of the social was associated with an increasing focus on economics – the social science that was viewed as having developed the tools for analyzing market interactions between isolated individuals – at the expense of sociology and, to a certain extent, psychology.⁸ Economists, more and more, defined their discipline as analyzing rational choice, a definition that minimized the importance of the social. The understanding that there were realms of life that could not be reduced to money and that should be kept outside the sphere of the market gradually broke down (see Offer 2006).⁹ At the policy level, that conception translated itself into the belief that problems of society could be solved by acting on one of its segments, as when neoliberals argued that, being the best coordinating device,

⁷ The argument in this paragraph is taken from Rodgers (2011), drawing in particular on the prologue.

⁸ A paradoxical illustration of the growing significance of the individualistic perspective in economics can be observed in Harvey Leibenstein's (1979) argument that a branch of economics was missing: micro-micro theory. Taking the example of economics in the 1930s, a time when the movement of the discipline was in the macro direction, Leibenstein argued that, unlike other sciences, economics had not necessarily moved toward the study of smaller and smaller entities, as illustrated by the fact that, when they spoke about decision units such as firms or households, economists had in mind collections of individuals not individuals. Leibenstein mostly hoped to draw attention to a number of problems associated with the role of individuals in multiperson decision units. His was clearly an individualistic perspective and one that gained prominence in the years that followed.

⁹ The provision and distribution of blood provide a telling illustration of the commodification of society from the 1970s (see Fontaine 2002).

the market mechanism should be gradually substituted for other forms of social coordination.¹⁰

The increased importance of the social sciences in society since the Second World War has coincided with their gradual estrangement from the past but has resulted in an increased willingness on the part of social scientists who write the histories of their disciplines to cover recent developments. At the same time, it has encouraged historians of science, intellectual historians, and even sociologists to pay more attention to the emergence of a distinctive academic culture in the social sciences, recognition of which was delayed by the customary partition of the intellectual life of Western societies into the natural sciences and humanities.¹¹

From Disciplinary Histories to the History of the Social Sciences

The history of the social sciences after the Second-World War is primarily written by social scientists, many of them interested in legitimizing current theoretical orientations or resuscitating older ones. Some social scientists may show greater historical sensibility (Geary 2008), but as a rule “discipline history,” as Collini (1988) called it, focuses on one particular discipline and tends to ignore its relationships with others, with sociologists writing about the history of sociology, psychologists writing about the history of psychology, economists writing about the history of economics, and so on.

In recent years, however, there have been attempts to take a more general perspective. As historians of science, intellectual historians, and even sociologists have turned increasingly to the study of the postwar era, greater attention has been paid to the social sciences as a whole (e.g., Ross 1991; Wagner, Wittrock, and Whitley 1991; Smith 1997; Wagner 2001; Porter and Ross 2003; Chapoulie 2005; Isaac 2007, 2009; Heilbron, Guilhot, and Jeanpierre 2008; Backhouse and Fontaine 2010a). Though they often had to rely on historical work by practicing social scientists whose orientations were clearly in the disciplinary mold, these researchers endorsed approaches that were not necessarily motivated by the current concerns of practitioners of the social science disciplines. Instead, they combined disciplinary

¹⁰ This perspective was vigorously promoted by free-market think tanks and other organizations and taken up enthusiastically by politicians, mostly on the Right. However, as Rodgers (2011) makes clear, it went much deeper than this.

¹¹ Kagan (2009, p. vii) motivated the writing of *The Three Cultures* by the observation that “the changes in the sciences and research universities over the past half-century had rendered Snow’s analysis a bit archaic.”

histories within narratives that put more store on the relations between social scientific work and the transformations of Western societies.¹²

The work by Dorothy Ross (1991) and Peter Wagner, Björn Wittrock, and Richard Whitley (1991) marked a first step in the attempt to consider the social sciences as a whole.¹³ Ross's *The Origins of American Social Science* (1991) related the rise of American social science to broader intellectual and cultural developments in American society. Initially an import from Europe, where modern understandings of history had been developed in the eighteenth century, the social sciences were seen as having emerged in response to what she called "the crisis of American exceptionalism" in the period after the Civil War. The Progressive era formed the common background to the emergence of the distinct disciplines of economics, sociology, and political science. The section titled "Progressive Social Science, 1896–1914" was the only part of the book, albeit a significant one, in which these social sciences were assigned separate chapters, for when Ross returned to the challenges to liberal exceptionalism and the rise of scientism, discussions of these three social sciences were again integrated. Unfortunately, the

¹² Not so long ago, it was not unusual to see the history of the social sciences as a whole relegated to a secondary role in history of science journals. For example, when Hamilton Cravens (1985) wrote on the history of the social sciences in a special issue of *Osiris* devoted to "historical writing of American science," the emphasis in the volume was clearly on the natural sciences. Yet, history of science journals are now increasingly hospitable to articles and even symposia dealing with the social sciences (Kaiser and Heyck 2010; Isaac 2011; Fontaine 2015).

¹³ An argument against placing the shift from disciplinary history to the history of the social sciences as a whole in the early 1990s is that the "social history of the social sciences" had emerged at least a decade earlier under the influence of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, informing a detailed analysis of the growth of the social sciences in France between 1945 and the late 1960s (for instance, see Drouard 1982). Centred on a sociology of knowledge in which disciplines are the crucial level of analysis, this literature considers ideas through the social conditions of their production and circulation, and views history as the mere instrument of a reflexive science. It can be seen as offering disciplinary-centred insights into the past of a variety of social science disciplines, though its accounts remained geared toward defending the progress of scientific reason (Bourdieu 1995). A recent illustration of the genre is to be found in Heilbron, Lenoir and Sapiro's *Pour une histoire des sciences sociales* (2004), a collection of essays that does not primarily concern the postwar era and hardly covers the whole social sciences. Renewed interest in the history of the social sciences can also be found in the activities of the *Société française pour l'histoire des sciences de l'homme*, created in the mid-1980s, which demonstrated a great variety of approaches and eventually prompted the reconsideration of disciplinary history even though the discussions preceding the formation of the *Société* were conducted within a framework that stresses the discipline as the relevant level of historical analysis (see Blanckaert 1993). Interestingly, the two foreigners present at the founding colloquium of the *Société*, Collini (1988, p. 399) and Charles C. Gillispie (1988, p. 380), expressed uneasiness at such a frame of analysis.