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# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## How to improve international and interdisciplinary cooperation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities

Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro

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### INTRODUCTION

Public policy can help improve international and interdisciplinary cooperation in science, and particularly in the social sciences and the humanities (SSH), which are more dependent on national traditions of thought and on national institutions. Based on the results of the INTERCO-SSH project (International Cooperation in the Social Sciences and Humanities), this policy brief makes some recommendations for strengthening the European research area in the SSH and facilitating exchanges beyond disciplinary and geographic borders.

The evidence summarized here on the recent evolutions of the SSH in a global context is based on an online paper synthesizing the preliminary findings of the Interco-SSH project (Heilbron, Boncourt, Schögler, Sapiro, 2017).

### 1) The SSH form an increasingly global field of research and training

The social sciences and humanities (SSH) are practiced today in virtually all regions and countries in the world (UNESCO, 2010). The basic units of this global field are the *SSH disciplines* as they are practiced in national academic systems worldwide. Not only have the SSH spread across the globe, the production of SSH articles and books has, over the past decades, increased considerably almost everywhere.

Transnational exchange and collaboration have, furthermore, become more frequent and more significant almost everywhere as well (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). Most international SSH professional associations, which used to be centered on Europe and North America, have diversified their membership, and have now held congresses on all continents (Boncourt, 2016 and forthcoming).

English has become the lingua franca in the social sciences. The share of publications in English among those registered in the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* has increased from half to more than three quarters, whereas the proportion of all other languages declined – the main ones, German and French, to a level of about 7 % each (Ammon, 2010; De Swaan, 2001a, b). As a medium for international communication no other language can compete with English.

At the same time, national languages as well as local and national publication practices subsist. Research into the specificities of local and national developments has retained its value, since the functioning, consequences, and meanings of social mechanisms depend much more on the context in which they operate than is the case in most of the natural sciences. Patterns of internationalization in the SSH therefore differ from internationalization in the natural sciences and will continue to do so (Heilbron, Sorá, Boncourt eds., forthcoming).

### 2) Western dominance exhibits a duopolistic structure

The globalizing field of social sciences is characterized by a *core-periphery structure*. The research capacity and research output are concentrated in a relatively small number of core countries. North America (USA and Canada) and Europe together produce more than 80 % of articles registered in the world's leading Citation Indexes (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014).

During the past three decades Europe has significantly increased its output and occupies a position that is close to that of the USA in terms of articles produced. The only other region with a substantial increase is Asia, but its production is much smaller than that of Europe and the USA (Mosbah-Natanson and Gingras, 2014). Together, North America and Europe account for about three quarters of the world's registered social science journals. Four countries only (USA, UK, Germany, Netherlands) publish two-thirds of the registered social science journals (Gingras and Mosbah-Natanson, 2010).

The globalizing field of the SSH is thus strongly dominated by “Western” countries displaying a duopolistic structure, with a North American-European core, various semi-peripheral and multiple peripheral countries (Heilbron, 2014a).

### 3) Globalization and transnational regionalization

Parallel to the globalization of the social sciences and humanities, a process of *transnational regionalization* is occurring (Heilbron, 2014 a, b). Although Europe is the most obvious and most advanced example, the phenomenon is not specific to this continent as is attested by the rise of regional organizations such as the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS), the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC), Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLASCO), and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

#### 4) Increasing global presence of European SSH

The first European associations in the social sciences were created in the 1960s but their role has grown since the 1990s. The same goes for the number of 'European' journals in the SSH (using the adjective European in their titles) (Heilbron, Timans, Boncourt, in press)

Intra-European co-authorships of scientific articles in the SSH, which are a measure of international cooperation, have also increased significantly - from 4 % of the registered articles in SSCI in 1980 to 22 % in 2014 -, though the growth followed a similar rate to co-authorships between scholars working in the EU and in the US (Heilbron and Gingras, forthcoming). Most small countries reinforced their share in this intra-European collaboration (the most spectacular being the Netherlands), while the percentage of French researchers decreased.

#### 5) The role of EU policy and funding in the growth and internationalization of the SSH

No doubt that, beyond the political context of the fall of the Berlin wall, the growth in intra-European scientific cooperation results in large part from the EU policy and EU funding, which has contributed to the structuring of a European research area in the SSH as in other domains (König and Schögler, forthcoming).

Among the European funding programs for research, the collaborative research projects have the *highest impact on international scientific collaboration* within Europe and beyond, especially with regard to peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, whereas the ERC, which has become an indicator of excellence, tends to reinforce inequalities (from 2007 to 2013, 26 % of the ERC funding went to the UK; 17.6 % to Germany; 15 % to France; 10.7 % to the Netherlands; in the SSH, the UK concentrates one third of the grants). The collaborative projects are also the most *policy-driven* and favor an *interaction* between policy-makers and SSH researchers. Lastly, they most frequently address *European issues*.

Indeed, despite the central role played by dominant countries such as the UK and Germany, who are involved in the highest number of projects, the collaborative projects have partly countered phenomena of hegemony and concentration by requiring a large number of partners, especially from Eastern Europe. The possibility of including Southern non-European countries also provides an opportunity to slightly correct the North-South inequalities in the production and circulation of knowledge.

More than professional associations, which occasionally gather researchers from different countries to present individual or collective research and which consequently foster networking rather than cooperation, the collaborative projects incite to real cooperation around a research project, favoring a more symmetrical circulation of knowledge.

This symmetry is of course not perfect for two main reasons:

- The propensity of researchers to cooperate in such projects already results from a certain degree of internationalization which, in many cases, presupposes the acceptance of dominant Western paradigms and methodologies.
- Power relations also exist within projects.

Of the 529 SSH collaborative projects funded by the three Framework programs between 1994 and 2006, 110 were coordinated in the UK, 88 in Germany, 76 in France, 44 in Italy and 40 in the Netherlands (Kovács and Kutsar, 2010: 107). Two reasons account for the UK's dominant position: linguistic skills in English, which is the working language; and the fact that, very early, British universities recruited qualified personnel to help scholars build these projects, especially on the management part which was new to many of them and required high technical skills. Whether the Brexit will or will not impact this dominance (perhaps not), the European Commission should pay attention to encouraging projects led by other countries, especially more peripheral ones.

Anyhow, it is within these policy oriented collaborative research projects that *multinational cooperation* reaches the highest density and diversity. It is there also that epistemological and methodological conditions for *international comparisons*, which are a major tool for the social sciences, are being systematized.

## 6) The politics of disciplines and interdisciplinarity: the necessity for improved funding of the SSH

However, the SSH are underrepresented in European funding (19 % of the budget of the ERC grants for a research capacity of 37 %; Hönig, forthcoming). In the policy driven collaborative research strand, SSH projects had a much smaller proportion of the funding (between 1 and 2 %).

In the current collaborative programs, beyond the specific funding which is decreasing, the SSH are embedded in other disciplinary programs, but they often tend to be reduced to *consulting*. The specificity of the SSH's object, which is human societies, is therefore undermined.

Moreover, the current tendency to consider *interdisciplinarity* only between the SSH and non-SSH domains is epistemologically unfounded and is often a means to reduce specific resources for the SSH and to weaken their critical power. Epistemologically speaking, the SSH are diverse, the issues and methods for establishing scientific statements vary from discipline to discipline and sometimes within a same discipline. This diversity is a source of tension and struggle within the disciplines, some of which are more open than others, according to the power relations between them (Gingras and Heilbron eds., 2015), but it is also a richness and a vital pluralism that cannot be arbitrated top-down by policymakers, only bottom-up through scientific arguments.

## 7) Overcoming the obstacles to the international and interdisciplinary circulation of ideas

Contrary to the natural sciences, books still form a major vehicle for disseminating research results in the SSH. As compared to articles, this is particularly so for dissemination across the boundaries of research specialties and disciplines, and for outreach to non-academic audiences, independently of the question of accessibility (green vs. gold open access). Moreover, as already said, translation is required in order to favor the international circulation of ideas in the SSH. However, translation flows tend to reproduce rather than correct the core-periphery structure. There are many more books translated from English than into English, whereas for all other languages the reverse holds true (Heilbron and Sapiro, 2016). The practice of translation is in this respect similar to that of citations: the more central the scientific production of a nation or region is worldwide, the more it has a chance of being cited and translated, and the lower the translation or citation rate is into this language (Heilbron, 1999; Sapiro, forthcoming).

Because of its linguistic diversity and high academic productivity, Europe occupies a central position in the networks of translations structuring the international academic book market. This centrality could be reinforced and the unequal power relations counterbalanced by a European policy supporting the translation of academic books, especially from peripheral to central languages (Sapiro and Seiler, 2016).

Note that the African continent is almost entirely absent from these exchanges, due to the dominance of the colonial languages and the weak development of academic publishing in African countries. This brings us to the issue of epistemological inequality.

## 8) The politics of epistemology: decentering Northern epistemology

As already said, one can observe the hegemony of the American social sciences, although the most quoted thinkers in these domains are still European. It is expressed by the figures of co-authorships between European and American researchers, and by the dominant position of American journals in most SSH disciplines. However, on the other hand, Western SSH are dominant with regards to the South, a dominance which relies on both ignorance and disparagement of the other traditions of thought. One of the coming challenges for the SSH is to *decenter Western epistemology*, to take other traditions into account and to build a more inclusive and more truly international SSH scholarly community. Some programs are currently working on this topic; it was addressed by the UNESCO 2010 world report on the SSH, but not yet in a European framework.

## 9) Supporting scholars in danger

This objective could be combined with programs supporting scholars in danger. Such programs have developed in several countries (most recently in France with the program PAUSE), but there is still no initiative at the European level.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERCO researchers identified several pro-active measures to improve interdisciplinary and international collaboration. The main finding is that both types of research need more generous funding and more time allocated than is usually the case with single disciplinary projects (see the Interco-SSH report online “Report on the means to improve international and interdisciplinary cooperation” by Fleck, Heilbron, Karady, Santoro, Sapiro, Sorà).

### 20 Measures / Best practices:

#### Cross-disciplinary Cooperation

- 1) Use specific cross-disciplinary programs in addition to disciplinary ones.
- 2) Encourage interdisciplinarity between SSH disciplines and also between the SSH and the Humanities, and mix methodologies (quantitative and qualitative).
- 3) Provide funding for areas that are already multidisciplinary.
- 4) Create special schemes for research, which bring together unusual distinct disciplines.
- 5) Assign additional resources, in particular time to develop a common space for exchange within interdisciplinary groups.
- 6) Support publications and new media outlets for communication across disciplinary borders.
- 7) Support interdisciplinary summer schools and workshops involving PhD students, in order to build interdisciplinary research networks.

#### International Cooperation

- 8) Maintain societal challenges-driven collaborative research strands in the SSH.
- 9) Money for medium-term mobility within collaborative EU projects in addition to the partner-system of cooperation.
- 10) Provide funds for linguistic work and/or allow for reports to be submitted in different languages of the EU.
- 11) Increase incentive for project staff to remain with EU projects to the end. Support the migration of academics within the ERA via more visible job announcements.
- 12) Support the migration of academics within the ERA via more visible job announcements
- 13) Encourage and support joint PhDs and joint or dual master programs.
- 14) Support international summer schools and workshops involving PhD students, in order to build transnational research networks.
- 15) Implement a program for supporting translation of SSH books, especially from peripheral languages to central languages (Sapiro and Seiler, 2016). This could also include support to multilingual online publications.



- 16) Encourage multilingualism in European projects (especially the dissemination in different languages).
- 17) Encourage free open access publications (“green”, as opposed to “gold” open access), also through the creation of a special EU fund supporting journals and publishers adopting it.
- 18) Support more North-South cooperation.
- 19) Implement a European program for helping scholars in danger.
- 20) Support scholars facing ideological biases of their respective public authorities, like in contemporary Hungary and Poland. National authorities censoring research grants to critical scholars in national institutions controlled by such governments should be pointedly fought against and counter-acted by European authorities.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

INTERCO-SSH set out, firstly, to assess the state of the SSH in Europe. Secondly, it aimed to outline potential future pathways that would promote cooperation across disciplinary and national boundaries. To achieve this, it was necessary to study the SSH in their socio-historical context. Under the context of this Policy Brief, the following specific objectives included within the Work Package 2 “Patterns of Institutionalization” should be noted:

- To identify national patterns of institutionalization which might explain the relative isolation of national traditions in the SSH, but also the operating patterns of crossed influences and international cooperation (competition, national self-assertion, efforts to 'catch-up', etc.).
- To assess the importance of the disciplinary division of labor within the SSH in order to reflect upon the historically changing power relations between branches of study, processes of professionalization of new disciplines, the reshaping of traditional forms of scholarship and the potentialities of new mechanisms of intellectual and institutional collaboration and exchange with or without consequences in terms of de-disciplinarization of disciplines concerned.
- To find out to which extent the varying institutional (or academic) division of labor within the SSH is an obstacle to cooperation among actual research branches and in which way its transformations can be a source of scientific innovation.

The finding will be summarized in three books coming out of the project, in a new series Socio-historical Studies of the Social and Human Sciences published by Palgrave Macmillan in London (see below forthcoming further readings).

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME**                      INTERnational COoperation in the SSH: Comparative Socio-Historical Perspectives and Future Possibilities (INTERCO-SSH)

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JOHN WESLEY COLLEGE – Centre for the historical sociology of religion – Budapest, Hungary

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UNIVERSITAET GRAZ – Department of Sociology – Graz, Austria

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**DURATION**

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2 493 239 €

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**WEBSITE**

<http://interco-ssh.eu/>

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Fleck, Christian, Victor Karady, and Matthias Duller eds. (forthcoming) *The Institutionalization of the Social Sciences and Humanities since 1945*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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