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Article

Histories of Recent Social Science

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Abstract: In the past thirty years or so, the history of the social sciences since 1945 has become a more diverse research area. In addition to social scientists who write the histories of individual disciplines, a number of historians are now interested in the recent past of the social sciences, whose efforts emphasize extradisciplinary concerns. The time is gone, however, when this distinction could be summarized by the different approaches of disciplinary histories on the one hand and intellectual history on the other. Disciplinary historians have gone beyond disciplinary concerns and intellectual historians have paid more attention to the latter. More generally, a variety of historians have pointed out the role of social scientific ideas in the transformations of Western societies after World War II and noted the impact of these transformations on social science disciplines themselves. Finally, in the past twenty years, histories of recent social science have experienced a transnational turn.

Keywords: history of the social sciences; disciplinary history; intellectual history; transnational history



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1. Introduction

In the past thirty years or so, besides the mere juxtaposition of disciplinary histories, which is usually referred to as the “history of the social sciences”, there emerged histories of social science that center on extradisciplinary concerns. For the most part, these histories are not the work of practitioners trained in a single social science. They instead originate in different academic communities—history of science, but also political, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural and intellectual history—which have acknowledged the rise to authority of the social sciences since World War II. In using the plural form for “history”, I mean to emphasize that the kind of historical attention received by the various social sciences depends on the nature of the subfield considered. Likewise, in referring to “social science” instead of the “social sciences”, I intend to point out that these historians’ interests are not necessarily in one of the latter in particular or in all of them in general, but reflect instead a gradual, but pervasive, form of acculturation to what C.P. Snow reluctantly called the “third culture” in the mid-1960s (Snow [1959] 1964, p. 70).

Even though new forms of the history of recent social science emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, disciplinary historians continue to constitute the bulk of those who write on the subject. That element of continuity should not obscure the fact that scientific theorizing and historical theorizing have drifted apart since 1945. The estrangement has not been total, nor has it impacted the various social sciences with the same force. Yet, as social sciences gradually lost touch with their past, the place of their practitioners who write about past ideas and theories became more uncertain and even marginal. To the extent that they are trained in the discipline which they historicize, disciplinary historians have qualified as social scientists. Yet, their practices are often at odds with those of other social science practitioners within their discipline. Some disciplinary historians may continue to foster some hope that they are recognized as full members of their parent disciplines, and some of the latter may be more tolerant than others in that respect (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010, p. 1), but their work is nonetheless regarded as secondary to the main orientations of social science disciplines.

In what follows, I consider three new developments in histories of recent social science. I first characterize the main orientations of disciplinary histories and argue that they have been increasingly sensitive to extradisciplinary concerns. Then, I show that despite their preference to look across disciplinary lines, intellectual historians have been more attentive to the way disciplinary identity influences the use of social scientific ideas in society. Finally, I show that in the past twenty years, greater attention to transnationalism has forced historians of the social sciences to rethink the way they write their narratives.¹

2. Disciplinary Histories

Even after the professionalization of the social sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, scientific theorizing and historical theorizing continued to stand in a relationship of complementarity. Students of society did not necessarily prioritize knowledge about the present over knowledge about the past, and therefore disciplinary demarcations between the social sciences and history were less pronounced than they became after WWII. It was common practice for leading social scientists to deal with the past, including the past of their discipline. A number of them did just that.

With the affirmation of the scientific nature of social science after WWII, however, a majority of social science practitioners began to see writing disciplinary history and building social science as two mutually exclusive practices. With inevitable variations among disciplines which strove to differentiate themselves from one another in the first half of the twentieth century, that development affected all social sciences in the post-WWII period, notably the core social sciences of economics, sociology and political science.

The situation of economics is particular, because, from the late 1940s, some of its practitioners made a significant effort to redirect the discipline away from its interwar inductive, historical and cross-disciplinary orientations towards more deductive, abstract and technical inclinations. As economics became less pluralistic (Morgan and Rutherford 1998), neoclassical economists claimed characteristics that differentiated them from economists averse to the mainstream, most notably estrangement from other social sciences, mathematization and an apolitical stance. They created for themselves a self-image that could help self-differentiation not only within the discipline, but also outside it, and eventually fostered its naturalistic ambitions.

With mainstream economists losing historical sensibility, there emerged within economics a new tribe of scholars trained in the discipline but mostly interested in its past, preferably the remote past.² Most of them were interested in theoretical, not historical, questions, but they did not mean their work to contribute to mainstream economics. Rather, they strove to revive forgotten or neglected traditions which they deemed superior to existing economic theory. As heterodox economics affirmed itself against neoclassical economics from the 1970s, its practitioners tended to define their identity in reference to past figures, creating the durable impression that the history of economics might be defined as a form of economic theorizing and that the upper limit of the past in the discipline ends right before mainstream economics took over. This explains why an important part of what is called the “history of economics” has been associated with heterodox economics from the early 1970s—an aggravating factor in the decline of the field within the economics profession (Weintraub 2007). It was when historians of economics increasingly began to turn their attention to postwar (US) economics in the 2000s that the equation between the history of economics and various forms of heterodoxies fractured. In more recent years, the field’s most significant transformation came from outside. A variety of historians—intellectual, economic, political and social, but also historians of science—as well as scholars from social sciences other than economics—have taken an increasing share of the writing of the history of recent economics (Fontaine 2016).

The comparison with sociology is illuminating in many respects. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, sociology still had a strong footing in continental Europe, and its languages of expression were primarily French and German. In the US the discipline’s institutional connections with economics departments were significant, but they weakened

with the decline of institutional economics from the late 1940s (Young 2009). Following WWII, US sociologists' sense of disciplinary identity consolidated. With institutions growing in importance within the subject areas of sociological theory and their analysis losing ground in economics, collaboration between the two disciplines did not make as much sense as before the war. In the post-1945 US, there was a shift in the way the relationship between sociology and economics was seen, from rather complementary over the period 1945–68 to competitive afterwards (Geary 2010).

One way in which sociology and economics could be said to be complementary after the war is the greater capacity of the former to maintain a constructive relationship with the past, probably because of its greater empirical (with survey research methods) and interpretive (with grand theoretical frameworks) inclinations. The connection between postwar sociology and the past should not be exaggerated, however. Otherwise, C. Wright Mills could not have made the intersections of problems of biography and history within social structures the gist of his merciless critique of abstracted empiricism and grand theory in the late 1950s (Mills 1959). Still, historical sociology continued to maintain a significant presence after the war in a way that compares favorably with the uses of history in economics.

Even though sociologists show more historical sensibility than their economist colleagues, there has been ambivalence with regard to the interest in past sociological ideas since WWII (Camic 2014). This is perhaps less true of France and Germany, where the history of sociology has often been equated with the social history of the social sciences and where the latter is often presented as an effort at critical reflexivity (Bourdieu 1995). Yet, as he characterizes the place of scholarship in the history of US postwar sociology, Charles Camic notes that since the 2000s the subfield has undergone a “return to the more purely peripheral intellectual and institutional position that it occupied . . . during the immediate postwar era” (Camic 2014, p. 123). That being said, sociologists' special interest in the conditions of the production and circulation of knowledge, and their self-identification as students of society, have facilitated the integration of extradisciplinary concerns within the disciplinary history of US sociology (e.g., Calhoun 2007).

As in economics and sociology, disciplinary histories of political science are mostly written by and addressed to its practitioners, and therefore center on disciplinary concerns. In the US, the connections between political science and history were significant up to the 1920s, when scientific pretensions and increased professionalization pulled the two disciplines apart (Adcock 2014).³ The actual scientization of the discipline took shape in the wake of WWII as the behavioral science movement increasingly impacted the social sciences.⁴ Throughout the 1950s, behavioralism experienced consolidation and by the 1960s it was possible to identify “key behaviorist articles of faith” and their “anti-behavioral” counterparts (Somit and Tanenhaus 1976, pp. 177–82). Under the behaviorist banner, the influence of US political science grew worldwide. Yet, behavioralism never enjoyed the kind of dominance that neoclassical theory did in economics, and the history of political science never became the preserve of anti-behavioralists. The widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the discipline predated the uneasiness with its behaviorist orientations, so much so that among historians of political science, the interest in the past could serve the legitimation of the behaviorist enterprise (e.g., David Easton) as much as its criticism (e.g., Bernard Crick) (Adcock 2014, pp. 217–18).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the kind of disciplinary histories which had hitherto dominated the postwar era were increasingly questioned by political scientists who began to contemplate, if not a relevant past for the whole discipline, “something of a composite image of political science, past and present” (Farr 1988, p. 1193). Those political scientists were aware of the alienation of political theory from political science, which echoed the situation of the history of thought in other social sciences (Gunnell 1988, p. 72). To some extent, the gradual estrangement of political theory from its parent field could be seen as a consequence of the behavioral revolution and its emphasis on scientific and empirical theory as opposed to theory as the history of political ideas. The whole purpose of the new

historiographical orientations was precisely to historicize competing narratives about the discipline's past, which opened the door for more context-sensitive histories that would eventually serve pluralism in the history of political science (Dryzek and Leonard 1988). Recognizing that the variety of histories of political science correspond to the diversity of its approaches prepared the ground for subfield history—notably in political theory and international relations—as much as for histories centered on geographical sites outside the US and UK. 'Disaggregation' was the keyword of the late twentieth century (Adcock 2014, pp. 225–27).

Lack of space prevents a broader account of disciplinary histories, but it should be emphasized that disciplines such as psychology and anthropology have rich disciplinary histories, too. Yet, because they also have a foot in natural science, the history of which has long been disconnected from its practice, those disciplines have been more susceptible to approaches that fall within the realm of history of science.⁵ The tensions between writing about the past from within and reconstructing it in light of extradisciplinary concerns are especially marked within psychology and anthropology (Kuklick 2014; Capshew 2014).⁶

3. Beyond Disciplinary Histories

As the social science disciplines achieved higher status in Western societies and around the world after WWII, intellectual historians began to take more seriously their recent history. They incorporated the production, circulation and reception of social scientific ideas in society in their narratives. Despite their preference for a cross-disciplinary approach, which differs from that of disciplinary history, intellectual historians have had no problem making the history of the social sciences one of their subfields (Collini 1988, p. 390). By the early 1990s, Dorothy Ross' *Origins of American Social Science* provided a convincing illustration of the place that economics, political science and sociology could hold in intellectual history. The book recognized the dominating influence of American exceptionalism on US society and culture and made the social sciences an instrument of its preservation (Ross 1991). As it stopped at the interwar period, the book did not consider the influence of postwar social science disciplines on society and culture. Yet, when Ross pushed her research into the postwar era ten years later, she did contemplate a more active role for the "social science disciplinary project" (Ross 2003, p. 229).

Since the early 1990s or so, therefore, intellectual historians have continued to write the history of postwar social sciences from a cross-disciplinary perspective, but they have also begun to pay more attention to the role of their disciplinary identities in relation to the translation of ideas into public policy. It could be argued that ideas often have multidisciplinary origins and that a variety of mediators participated in their transition from social science to policy making. That is not to say, however, that disciplinary identity is of no historical significance with regard to the impact of social scientific ideas, for it influences their credit at a given point in time. Likewise, disciplinary identity is intimately connected with the way practitioners see the division of their discipline between science and art or between basic and applied science, which impacts in turn its relationship with policy making. Finally, the definition of disciplines—by subject matter or by method or otherwise—and the place their practitioners attributed to lay knowledge in the construction of ideas impact their use in society.

The turning point, then, occurred around the end of the Cold War.⁷ In that respect, David Hollinger's comment, in 2012, "that the field of American intellectual history over the last quarter-century has become increasingly focused on political ideas and social theory" (Hollinger 2012, p. 186), or to be more precise, that it "is less and less disposed to engage ideas except in their political role" (p. 199), deserves special attention. Given that ideas often cut across disciplinary concerns, it is understandable that intellectual historians are more interested in the social sciences as a whole and in social scientists whose ideas get an audience outside their own discipline, indeed outside academia (see Butler 2012). At the same time, intellectual historians have shown less reluctance towards taking into account the role disciplines play in making social-scientific ideas usable for public purposes.

Here, it is economic and psychological ideas to which we should address our attention, since economics and psychology have probably been the two social science disciplines with the greatest impact on society and culture after WWII. Standing on opposite sides of the divide between intellectual unity and intellectual fragmentation, economists and psychologists have nonetheless been able to achieve much influence on postwar societies: the former because they built for themselves an image of “practitioners of a rigorous, dispassionate, and apolitical discipline” (Bernstein 2001, p. 152), which enhanced their reputation as apolitical advisers among policy makers and helped make rational pricing the guiding criterion of policy making; the latter because they took advantage of the image of their discipline “as a jack-of-all-trades science” (Capshew 1999, p. 188) to “find allies practically everywhere” (p. 185) and to justify their interventions in a variety of sectors in society.⁸

It took time for intellectual historians to recognize what contribution social scientific ideas make to society, however. They were busy acknowledging the way social science disciplines were affected by the Cold War in the first place (e.g., Chomsky et al. 1997; Simpson 1998).⁹ Back in the 1990s, the prime-mover status of the Cold War continued to relegate to the background the actual impact of the social sciences on society. As Simpson noted in the Introduction to *Universities and Empire*, “in the short term, power typically selects ideas ... while in the long-term ideas tend to conform to the realities of power” (p. xxix).

From the early 2000s, however, the balance tilted, not that the Cold War context lost attraction, but rather that the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall offered intellectual historians a new perspective from which to reconsider the meaning of the Cold War as much as it helped redirect attention towards the interwar, WWII and immediate postwar periods—the pre-Cold War. In the process, social scientific ideas were granted more agency. Modernization theory is a good case in point: offering a comprehensive theory of society, it was said to have shaped US foreign policy in a significant way (Latham 2000; Gilman 2003; Engerman et al. 2003). Its multidisciplinary origins fitted the cross-disciplinary approach in intellectual history. Likewise, the intellectual status and political influence of some of its advocates, such as economic historian Walt Whitman Rostow, made the study of modernization theory a natural occupation for intellectual historians.

Just as economics, political science and sociology helped define the recommendations that inspired US foreign policy through modernization theory, postwar psychology offered a new worldview that inspired the recommendations of its experts and eventually increased its influence on public policy (Herman 1995). The involvement of intellectual historians with psychology is less common than with economics, perhaps because the former’s connections with the natural sciences makes it a more familiar object of study for historians of science.¹⁰ Yet, intellectual historians did not miss the effort to “construct a comprehensive ‘science of human behavior’ that would be theoretically sophisticated yet practically equipped for the tasks of ‘prediction’ and ‘control’” (p. 307). Likewise, they have been receptive to psychology’s ability to provide a language for understanding the self and its transformations, which has been a topic of longstanding sociological concern (e.g., Rose 1990).

From the early 2010s, a new orientation emerged among intellectual historians interested in social science disciplines. In the late 2000s, Duncan Bell was still arguing that neoliberalism “was poorly served by intellectual historians” (Bell 2009, p. 13), but soon, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, important works were produced that place neoliberal ideas at the center of their argument (Rodgers 2011; Burgin 2012). Unlike Jennifer Burns’ (Burns 2009) essay on Ayn Rand and a number of other books that appeared in the 2000s, *Age of Fracture* and *The Great Persuasion* were not merely about neoconservatism. They also dealt with neoliberalism and, as a result, questioned the equivalence between conservatism and free-market capitalism: the former because it equated the rediscovery of the market with the emergence of a rhetoric that presented the market as surpassing any other coordinating mechanisms in society and implied therefore that it should be substituted for

them whenever possible; the latter because it historicized the reinvention of free markets and made the success of the idea the combined result of agency and contingency, not the inevitable expression of its intrinsic value. In placing markets at the center of their narratives on neoliberalism, Rodgers and Burgin could not ignore those in economics who occasionally pointed out the magic of markets, but at the same time they reminded their readers of the need to distinguish between the economic notion of market and its public understanding.

To this day neoliberalism has remained an “ideal subject for intellectual historians” (Jackson, forthcoming) and a clear illustration of their engagement with social scientific ideas in their political role. In this respect, it is worth noting that the very scholar who had placed social sciences at the center of intellectual history back in the early 1990s recently asked: “Whatever Happened to the Social in American Social Thought?” (Ross 2021, 2022). Unlike those who argue that the weakening of the social coincided with the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s, Ross suggests that it began during the long 1950s. There is no need to detail her sophisticated intellectual historical argument; suffice it to say that it is based on an in-depth analysis of the role of social scientific ideas in society.

4. The View from Elsewhere

Among the various turns that are supposed to describe the transformations of history as a discipline since 1945, the transnational turn is of a special nature. It implies a widening of perspective more than a focus on forces—political, social or cultural—that are otherwise conveniently associated with a specific historical subfield. In history, the transnational turn is generally said to have occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when historians found the idea of cross-national forces especially useful to describe globalization and the concomitant emergence of a transnational consciousness (Iriye 2004).¹¹

Even before the turn of the century, scholars interested in the past of the social sciences had felt the need to go beyond national contexts, if only because of the dislocations provoked by the rise of Nazism and the resulting emigration of social scientists to the United States (Cosser 1984; Ash and Söllner 1996; Krohn [1987] 1993; Hagemann 1997). Yet, it is one thing to pay attention to the impact and experience of refugee scholars, it is quite another to study the ways transnational forces shape the social sciences and are dealt with by their practitioners as a rule. A notable step in that direction occurred with the publication of Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross’s *The Modern Social Sciences* in 2003. The volume endorsed an international perspective, with essays on social science in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Greater attention to the internationalization of the social sciences should not necessarily be equated with endorsement of their transnational history, however. The last chapter of the volume was on modernization theory, the precepts of which have often been challenged by the advocates of transnationalism. Yet, in giving more visibility to actors, ideas and practices from different geographical centers, the volume played no minor role in challenging the frequent preconception that the “history of the social sciences since 1945” is about the US, UK and Europe (Porter and Ross 2003).

By the late 2000s, scholars were proposing a programmatic outline of a transnational history of the social sciences. Sociologists more than historians were responsible for that development (Heilbron et al. 2008; see also Fleck 2011). To some extent, the emergence of a transnational history of the social sciences speaks to the significance of the French “social history of the social sciences”—a branch of historical sociology—and of its emphasis on the social conditions of the international circulation of ideas.¹² It was also facilitated by the fact that social scientists themselves had considered cross-national forces even before historians did, so that disciplinary histories were especially receptive to the transnationalist approach. Soon, scholars who were interested in the past of the social sciences and wished to transcend national boundaries contributed to making the transnational flow of people and ideas something more than a simple import–export story.¹³

In the history of the social sciences, the “transnational turn” consolidated throughout the second decade of the twentieth century, following a rich decade of studies of mod-

ernization theories and the realization that the struggle between the two superpowers was not a sophisticated enough conceptual framework to convey the transformations of postwar social sciences worldwide. In the eyes of its advocates, transnational history can be studied through a variety of themes such as international scholarly institutions, the mobility of scholars or the politics of transnational exchange of nonacademic institutions (Heilbron et al. 2008). Overall, however, the idea is that whatever level of analysis is considered, be it the local, the national or the international, it may be profitable for historians of the social sciences to acknowledge the structuring and defining power of transnational relations and, accordingly, accept the reality of a transnational space that shapes knowledge as much as its specific locations do throughout time.

Over the past ten years, the efforts to build a transnational history of the postwar social sciences have intensified, culminating in the publication of the recent essay collection *Cold War Social Science: Transnational Entanglements*, edited by Mark Solovey and Christian Dayé (Solovey and Dayé 2021). That volume makes clear that social scientists learn to adapt to new cultures and that their personal change affects in turn the way they approach their new environment as much as their culture of origin. Likewise, it shows that policy demands stand as a crucial factor in the production and transformation of social science because its results are used for ideologically opposed purposes. Finally, it demonstrates that going beyond US-centered narratives and endorsing multivocal narratives inevitably changes our understanding of important aspects of knowledge production and circulation. There is no reason, however, to limit the benefits of the transnationalist approach to the Cold War, especially since many of the expectations of the first decade following its end have since been disabused (Parrott 2022).

5. Conclusions

Over the past three decades, histories of recent social science have undergone three major transformations. First, disciplinary historians have shown themselves to be increasingly sensitive to extradisciplinary concerns. Secondly, intellectual historians have been more attentive to the way that disciplinary identity impacts the use of social scientific ideas in society. Finally, historians and social scientists alike have recognized the need for the history of the social sciences to take greater account of the transnational flow of people and ideas. These transformations are linked with the emergence of a community of scholars who investigate the past of the social sciences from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. With the founding of the *Society for the History of Recent Social Science* in 2014, the new subfield now has a platform where a plurality of voices can be brought together to shed light on the vicissitudes of the third culture in the twentieth century and the next.

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Notes

- ¹ It may be argued that my framework allows for inadequate attention to those historians of social science who are trained in the history of science, but the great disparity observable in the proportion of historians of science among the various historians of individual social sciences complicates a homogeneous treatment of that subfield. The definition of the history of recent social science as a subdivision of the history of science is rather problematic when one considers the core social sciences of economics, political science and sociology (see section “History of Social Science and History of Science” in Fontaine 2022).
- ² By the 1990s, historians of economics were still mostly interested in the period spanning the emergence of political economy in the mid-eighteenth century through the years of high theory around the 1930s.
- ³ On the construction of the new science of politics, see Farr (2003, pp. 315–20).
- ⁴ The participation of political science in the behavioral science movement took the form of a more discipline-centred contribution illustrated by the use of a specific term—*behavioralism* (Fontaine 2020, p. 166).
- ⁵ There might be other determining factors such as discipline size, the place of natural-science methods in the profession or its career prospects, but the interpretation of their impact is particularly vexing.

- ⁶ The above tensions arise repeatedly in the history of anthropology and in the history of psychology as illustrated by [Stocking \(1965\)](#) and [Young \(1966\)](#), respectively.
- ⁷ Joel Isaac provides an instructive review of the burgeoning literature on the postwar US human sciences from the late 1980s and early 1990s and of the efforts of intellectual historians to produce “multicontextual accounts” (accounts, that is, going beyond the Cold War context) of their increased transformative power since 1945 ([Isaac 2007](#)).
- ⁸ Ross described economics and psychology as the “preeminent engineering sciences” ([Ross 2014](#), p. 209).
- ⁹ Other illustrations include the study of the impact of postwar transformations and central national events on social science disciplines in research universities ([Hollinger 1996](#), chp. 5; [Lowen 1997](#)).
- ¹⁰ The *Companion to Intellectual History*, edited by Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, does not include a chapter on intellectual history and the history of psychology, whereas it features a chapter on the relationship between the former and the history of economics ([Whatmore and Young 2016](#)).
- ¹¹ It may still be too early to speak of a “global” history of the social sciences even though a variety of scholars have pondered the implications of globalization for the social sciences for more than two decades now (e.g., [Martinez 1998](#), pp. 606–8). Of particular interest here is UNESCO’s initiative of a *World Social Science Report* in 1999 and its effort to review the place of the social sciences on a world scale ([Kazancigil and Makinson 1999](#)). For a more sophisticated and historically sensitive approach, however, see [Heilbron \(2014\)](#).
- ¹² Rather than detailing the relationship between the social history of the social sciences and social history proper, it may be remembered that some historians see “French social history . . . [as] a kind of retrospective or diachronic sociology”. It is worth noting that social history is also presented as a form of transversality in that it “pretended to constitute the synthesis of every specialized history” ([Prost 1992](#), p. 674).
- ¹³ As aptly reminded by Clavin, national boundary-crossing need not be associated with the idea that borders break down ([Clavin 2005](#), p. 431).

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