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The Modern Social Sciences

Edited by

THEODORE M. PORTER
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INTRODUCTION
Writing the History of Social Science

Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross

How do we write the history of social science? There are problems even with the name. In English alone, “sciences of man,” “moral sciences,” “moral and political sciences,” “behavioral sciences,” and “human sciences” have been among its many predecessors and competitors. Their proliferation reflects the unsettled nature of this broad subject matter. All are capable of giving offense, both by exclusion and by inclusion. Many have long and contradictory histories.

Consider the career of the “moral sciences.” The phrase “sciences morales et politiques” was introduced in France about 1770. In 1795 it was enshrined as the official label for the “second class” of the Institut de France (the former Académie des Sciences was the first class), until this nest of critics was reorganized out of existence by Napoleon in 1803. Restored in 1832, the official institution of the moral and political sciences was now suitably conservative, emphasizing philosophy and individual morality. John Stuart Mill, an admirer of Auguste Comte’s “sociology,” included in his enduringly influential 1843 treatise on logic a section aiming to “remedy” the “backward state of the moral sciences” by “applying to them the methods of physical science, duly extended and generalized.” A German translation of Mill’s work rendered “moral sciences” as Geisteswissenschaften – not the first use of that German term, but an influential one. It referred to the sciences of Geist, which could be translated back into English as “spirit” or “mind.” In German, this remained a standard label until well into the twentieth century. It was understood to indicate that such studies had a moral and spiritual character, quite unlike the sciences of nature.

In French and English, there has been more emphasis on the continuity of scientific knowledge. David Hume, among others, argued in the eighteenth century that politics could be a science. “Political economy,” especially in Enlightenment Scotland, was part of a broad effort to comprehend the moral and historical dimensions of human society. It had gained wide acceptance by the early nineteenth century and was appreciated for
Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross

its contribution to the art of governing. The usual German term, “national economy,” evoked this political dimension still more clearly, while the French campaign to replace it with "social economy" implied a certain discontent with mere politics. Such also was the tendency of “social science,” a term that first gained currency in French, having been introduced just prior to the French Revolution. It expressed an increasingly widespread view that politics was conditioned by something deeper. Social science aimed to comprehend the forces of progress and their instabilities in a way that reduced neither to an individualistic, psychological dimension nor to the domain of state and government. In this respect, it provided an enduring model for “scientific” investigation of the human domain.

In English, the “social sciences,” now plural, emerged in the late nineteenth century, above all in the United States, and that umbrella term remains in common use. But any word or phrase presuming to name so disparate an endeavor was bound to create controversy. For a time, it seemed possible that social knowledge would not require such synthetic labels, because it would be united in a single field. This was Comte’s vision for “sociology,” and in the later nineteenth century some envisioned “anthropology” in the same way. More recently, the challenge to “social sciences” has come overwhelmingly from those who would secede from them. Psychologists have been the least happy with that phrase, pressing often to be grouped with the biologists, or, if they had to keep the company of sociologists and anthropologists, insisting at least on a rival adjective. The term “behavioral sciences” gained wide currency in the mid twentieth century in North America, but not in Europe. Indeed, the object of behaviorism can scarcely be called social, and its late-twentieth-century decline in favor of “cognitive” and physiological orientations only accentuated the differences. Neither can economics be described straightforwardly as a social science, and economists often claim a higher standing for their field. “Social, behavioral, and economic sciences” has begun to emerge as a bureaucratic designation. We have only to add “political,” “cultural,” “demographic,” and “historical” to embrace all of those university disciplines lying outside the professional schools that are neither humanities nor sciences of nature nor mathematics. But this is taxonomic splitting run amok.

The French language offers an appealing alternative, the sciences humaines, or human sciences. The term dates back at least to the seventeenth century. During the Enlightenment it was more or less synonymous with sciences de l’homme (sciences of man), then a very common designation and one that remains acceptable in French, though it has become officially sexist in English. Sciences humaines regained its currency in the 1950s, and was particularly favored by Georges Canguilhem and Georges Gusdorf. They used it to refer to a broadly philosophical tradition of inquiry, embodying a humanistic vision that provided an alternative to the work of technocratic specialists who
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divide up the human domain – indeed, who carve up l’homme himself, the better to manage him. Michel Foucault adopted the name, but associated it more darkly with professional and administrative forms of knowledge. The phrase “human science” has spread to English mainly because of Foucault’s extraordinary impact on the academic humanities. Roger Smith used it as the title of a synthetic historical work emphasizing the history of psychology in relation to a wide domain of social thought and investigation. In English, at least, “human science” remains a category of the scholarly observer, mostly unknown to “human scientists,” if such there be. Its provenance is ill defined. Psychology and psychiatry are central to it, along with ethnography. Studies of language, literature, art, and music are often included, and the vast domain of medicine occupies the borderlands. The more mathematical fields, notably economics, are sometimes excluded, ostensibly as inhuman sciences.

Although the term “human science” has its attractions, we have not chosen it for this volume. We have also resisted the temptation to multiply terms. While we recognize, and indeed emphasize, the diversity of the social sciences, we are impressed also by their family resemblances, at least from a cultural and intellectual standpoint. One of the crucial ambitions of this volume is to show what is gained by bringing their histories together, if not in a single narrative, then at least in a group of intersecting essays. So it is not just in order to save ink that our title names its topic with only one adjective. We have chosen “social.”

There is also some question about “science,” which has long been understood to imply a certain standard of experimental or conceptual rigor and of methodological clarity. In English, especially in the twentieth century, the claim to scientific status has meant the assertion of some fundamental resemblance to natural science, usually regarded even by social scientists as the core of “real” science – as temporally prior and logically exemplary. Historically, however, this appears to be something of a misapprehension. Although science has long referred to natural or human knowledge as opposed to revelation, theology had a better claim to the status of science during the Middle Ages than did the study of living things, or even the study of matter in motion. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an assortment of names was used for various branches or aspects of natural knowledge, including “natural philosophy,” “natural history,” “experimental physics,” and “mixed mathematics.” “Science” was too nebulous to be useful, especially in English, until about 1800, when it emerged as the standard name for the organized

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