1 Modernism and the Social Sciences

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The modern "social sciences" did not begin to emerge as a cluster of relatively coherent disciplines until the end of the nineteenth century. It was only during the twentieth century that many of them became housed in distinct university departments with their own appointments, bolstered by professional associations and journals, and legitimized by their own norms. The modern social sciences arose as part of a dramatic intellectual shift. Whereas the nineteenth century had been dominated by developmental historicisms that were rooted in romantic and organic concerns with life, creativity, and change, the twentieth century was increasingly dominated by formal types of social knowledge that relied on models, correlations, and classifications.[1]

Modernism needs to be distinguished from modernity. Modernity and modern history can stand in contrast to ancient and medieval history. Modernity can also be used to refer to the historical period that has come after the Enlightenment. In contrast to these uses of the word "modernity," "modernism" usually refers to literary, artistic, and architectural movements dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernists rejected much of their nineteenth-century heritage. Many of them believed that urban industrial societies required new cultural forms and new types of knowledge. Some of them challenged the certainty and confidence that had characterized so much of Enlightenment and romantic thinking. Others among them wanted to remake their world using new scientific and technical knowledge.

Although modernism is mainly associated with literary and artistic movements, it is now widely recognized that these movements were part of a broader cultural shift that was also found in the social and natural sciences. Modernists approached knowledge in atomistic and analytic ways. They broke up wholes and narratives. They focused on units and their place in abstract schemas. They generally relied less on historical explanations than on formal ones. Even when they did appeal to history, it was to find evidence or cases that supported or illustrated more formal mechanisms and causes.

It is important to emphasize that this book does not address the generally heated and unhelpful debates about postmodernism. The aim is not to first derive a concept of modernism from the contrast with postmodernism and then to impose this concept back on the past. On the contrary, the aim is to start with the familiar concept of modernism that is found in discussions of modernist art, architecture, and literature, and then to study the extent to which similar types of modernism can be found in the social sciences. The argument of this book is that during the twentieth century, the social sciences increasingly rested on modernist assumptions. However, because modernism itself was far from monolithic, this book is also an exploration into the varieties of modernism and their differing impact across the assorted social sciences.

Generally when historians have written about the impact of modernism on the social sciences, they have focused on cognitive modernism.[2] Cognitive modernism consists primarily in an insistence on the subjective nature of perception and cognition. This subjectivism was one inspiration for the wider modernist rejection of historicism: history seemed to collapse into contemporary subjective understandings of the past. This subjectivism also contributed to the looming threat of cognitive and moral relativism: all claims to knowledge seemed to be ineluctably tied to particular subjective perspectives.

Because historians have already shown the importance of cognitive modernism, the essays in this book generally focus on two other varieties of modernism: aesthetic and methodological modernism. Aesthetic modernism emphasized that human subjects played a creative role in the construction of the various schemas, narratives, myths, and other representations by which they organized the confusing and messy particulars of their existence so as to fuse apparently contrary themes and bring meaning to their world. Methodological modernism highlighted the importance both of grounding knowledge in secure facts and then of ordering and interpreting these facts through formal structures, classifications, models, and correlations. Obviously, these aesthetic and methodological modernisms are closely related and often overlap. Apart from anything else, both of them involve a rejection of the characteristic nineteenth-century idea that meaning, reason, and truth are built into the very process of historical development. Aesthetic modernism sees meaning, reason, and truth as the fragile, temporary, and perhaps poetic constructions of human subjects. Methodological modernism presents them as the hard-won, formal, and perhaps ungrounded theorems of academic inquiry. However, even here we are seeing the difference between the two. Aesthetic modernism presses on a gap between subjectivity and reality that makes its representations of the world come

across as artifices and that leads to a self-reflexive concern about the constructed nature of its claims to truth. In contrast, methodological modernism presses on the ability of human perception and human reason to overcome subjectivity and justify claims about the objectivity of facts and the validity of the formal explanations and theories that explain those facts.

The Rise of Modernism

In the late nineteenth century, social scientists conceived of their work in terms of both historical narratives and scientific rigor. They thought that valid historical narratives depended on the systematic, impartial, painstaking, and rigorous collection and sifting of facts, and they identified science with such inductive rigor. Even when social scientists were committed to rigorous inductive methods, in other words, they typically collected and sifted the facts in a way that relied on what we might call "developmental historicism."

Developmental historicism could take numerous forms reflecting its disparate sources. It often owed much to the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers had forged a science of society that explored the development of sociability in relation to a "stadial" Whig historiography that culminated in patterns of exchange that were thought to be analogous to the movement of the planets. In addition, developmental historicism owed much to an organic and romantic outlook that stressed the ability of living beings to make and remake social life through their actions, which were infused with their purposes, thought, and imagination.

The conjunction of Whig historiography and romantic organicism inspired numerous attempts to make sense of human life and human society in developmental terms.[3] In the early and mid-nineteenth century, developmental historicists were using evolutionary tropes to frame narratives of the unfolding of the principles of nationality and liberty along fairly fixed paths. Famous examples include the Whig constitutional histories of J. R. Green and William Stubbs. By the close of the nineteenth century, developmental narratives were also appearing from both sides of the philosophical dispute between the idealists and the positivists. Although the positivists often followed August Comte, J. S. Mill, and, at times, Leopold von Ranke in promoting scientific methods, they increasingly identified evolutionary theory as the pinnacle of science, and they thus adopted developmental historicism as a suitable setting in which to situate their empirical findings.[4] It was this evolutionary positivism that Beatrice and Sidney Webb hoped to foster when they founded the

London School of Economics in 1895. Likewise, although the idealists often sought to unpack the absolute as spiritual perfection, they increasingly used Hegelianism and social organicism in ways that made developmental historicism the setting in which the absolute unfolded.[5] It was this organicist idealism that Bernard and Helen Bosanquet drew on when they confronted the Webbs in the great Edwardian debate about social policy.[6] In general, therefore, developmental historicism was able to dominate the social sciences during the nineteenth century precisely because it could bring together conjectural Whig histories, theories of evolution, and accounts of the unfolding of divine providence.

Although historicism was unquestionably dominant throughout the Victorian era, there were alternatives. Some of these alternatives flowered only briefly and left little behind. Others were more important, including the utilitarian tradition with its debt to a more rationalistic strand of Enlightenment thinking than that which flowed into Whig historiography. Utilitarianism persisted well into the nineteenth century, especially in the study of law where Jeremy Bentham and John Austin inspired a powerful tradition of legal positivism.[7] Crucially, utilitarianism also helped to inspire more formal synchronic approaches to economics, giving greater scope to deductive and mathematical reasoning. William Stanley Jevons extended the utilitarian analysis of rationality to economics, analyzing all costs in terms of disutility, thereby making them substitutable for one another, and analyzing the price of commodities as a result of their final degree of utility.[8] Jevons' neoclassical economics, unlike the classical political economy of the Victorian era, could focus on the formal and static analysis of a system in equilibrium.

In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, economists generally attempted to combine historicist narratives with formal deductive and mathematical reasoning.[9] The leading example was the famous synthesis of Alfred Marshall. If Marshall is famous for his attempt to combine neoclassical and classical economics, it should also be remembered that he aspired to locate this synthesis within a historicist framework. Nonetheless, although Marshall and other neoclassical economists made historicist gestures, there can be no doubting that they were the first wave of a modernist tide that would eventually sweep away Victorian historicism.

Modernism had roots not only in utilitarianism, but also in a Victorian skepticism. Although the Victorian crisis of faith generally inspired immanentist theologies that reflected the impact of organicism, it also gave rise to a modernist skepticism that ran counter to this immanentism. This skepticism made nineteenth-century narratives of universal progress appear too optimistic and too ambitious. It made nineteenth-century notions of truth and duty appear too rigid and too austere,

perhaps even hypocritical shams. Many modernists thus sought more cautious, more constrained, and less self-confident ways of knowing and being. Social scientists shifted their focus from wholes and their evolution to atomistic and analytical studies of discrete and discontinuous elements and the assemblages to which these gave rise. So, for example, Graham Wallas rejected both idealist historicism and utilitarian rationalism. He wanted political science to rely on the quantitative study of actual behavior, not on deductions from assumptions about reason, character, and social evolution.[10] Similarly, artists and moralists – including, most famously, the Bloomsbury Group – turned away from individual and social duties and toward good states of mind and personal relations. So, E. M. Foster and Virginia Woolf wrote in more uncertain voices about more fragmented and private worlds than had Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens.[11] At the edge of such modernism, new ideas emerged of self-reference, incompleteness, and radical subjectivity that had been almost entirely absent from Victorian thought.

If modernism had Victorian roots, it was nonetheless the experience of World War I that decisively undermined developmental historicism. The War shattered the Victorians' confidence in progress and reason, the romantic belief in the role of spirit in organic life, and the assumption that social evolution was purposive.[12] History and social life could no longer be seen as expressions of the development of moral character and of social reason. For Victorians, human action had been "conduct" that was infused with reason, morality, and purpose. In the twentieth century, human action became "behavior" that was to be analyzed either apart from all assumptions about mind or in relation to hidden desires and forces that were all too likely to overpower reason and morality. The collapse of developmental historicism thus coincided with the rise of new social theories such as structuralism, behaviorism, and psychoanalysis.

Images and ideals of progress still appeared after World War I, but progress was increasingly seen as a contingent victory of human activity. Progress was no longer guaranteed by an evolutionary cosmology or the laws governing an inexorable Whig historiography. On the contrary, the contingent victory of progress was thought to depend on the promotion of new sciences that could guide attempts to resolve social and political problems. World War I thereby encouraged calls for new sciences even as it eroded older historical narratives. The new social sciences that arose in this context were modernist. Social scientists drew increasingly heavily on a methodological modernism that privileged mathematical and logical innovations that dated from the early nineteenth century. Some social scientists also extended the modernist skepticism associated with the Victorian crisis of faith.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, aesthetic and methodological modernisms replaced developmental historicism.[13] Modernism was generally atomistic and analytic. It broke up the continuities and gradual changes of earlier evolutionary narratives. It divided the world into discrete, discontinuous units, whether these were empirical facts or single propositions. It made sense of these units through mathematical rules and analytic schemas. It used synchronic models, calculations, typologies, systems, and structures to explain the nature and behavior of the atomized units. For example, when political scientists pursued the study of comparative institutions in the way already made familiar by James Bryce, they increasingly treated each institution as a discrete atom to be compared and classified together with similar atoms in other systems, rather than as part of a whole political system to be understood in the context of the historical evolution of the relevant nation. As early as 1921 Herman Finer added to his study of comparative government an analytic index of topics that enabled readers to compare similar institutions across states. By 1932, he had begun to present his studies in analytic rather than historical terms, proceeding topic by topic, and discussing institutions in comparison with similar ones in other countries rather than in the context of a historical narrative.[14]

Of course, Victorian historicism did not disappear overnight. Up until at least 1940, developmental historicism remained prominent in American and British culture.[15] Nonetheless, in the twentieth century, historicism lost its confidence in any telos, so historicist narratives began to exhibit self-doubt and nostalgia. Sometimes historical narratives were replaced by an aesthetic modernism that was focused on formal and ineluctable dichotomies and aporias. This aesthetic modernism was most common in the arts and the humanities so, unsurprisingly, its main appearance in this book is in the chapters on history and on anthropology. At other times, historical narratives were replaced by a methodological modernism that was focused on formal and synchronic explanations. Throughout the social sciences, the focus shifted away from wholes and their evolution toward atomistic and analytical studies of elements and their combination. Formal social science replaced historical narratives as the leading guide to corporate life and to public policy.

Modernism across the Disciplines

The twentieth century was an age of modernism across the social sciences. Yet, the social sciences differed from one another in their experience of the timing of the rise of modernism, the balance between

modernism and positivism, and the specific content given to modernism. Modernism became ubiquitous, but it always contained competing strands and it always allowed for conflicting views on important issues.

In the next chapter, Roger Backhouse discusses the discipline of economics. He argues that modernist methods arose particularly quickly and sweepingly in economics. Even in the early twentieth century, the key methodological debates were debates within modernism. From 1885 to 1930, economics contained both formal mathematical and more historical impulses. Indeed, as I have already mentioned, Alfred Marshall, who was arguably the most famous economist of the age, explicitly tried to combine these two impulses in his synthesis. Between the wars, the mathematical impulse gave rise to an increasingly rigorous econometrics while the historical one mutated into a more formal institutionalism that, at least within the United States, often appealed to pragmatism. According to Backhouse, the Keynesian revolution consisted less of the displacement of one theory by another than of a transformation within these two strands of economics. The econometric movement absorbed Keynesianism by transforming it into an algebraic framework by which to integrate theories of money and of the business cycle with data analysis. The institutionalist movement absorbed Keynesianism by incorporating the role that it gave to macroeconomic modeling alongside their empirical sensitivity to social and political systems.

By the 1950s, institutionalism, let alone the historicism of the nineteenth century, had effectively disappeared from economics. As Backhouse argues, economists such as Lionel Robbins standardly reduced institutionalism to historicism before then rejecting them both together. Economic theory became increasingly committed to deductions (and so arguably positivist). In Britain, Robbins himself used a purely formal definition of economics – as the scientific study of the allocation of scarce resources among competing ends – further to distance economic theory from any empirical foundations. Similarly, in the United States, economists such as Milton Friedman adopted the positivist view that economic theory should generate hypotheses to be confirmed by observations. Freidman himself suggested that economists need not worry about the unrealistic nature of the assumptions that they made about the world. He argued that the justification of their assumptions and theories lay not in their empirical realism, but in their ability to generate hypotheses that econometricians could test. This positivist view of theory-building continued to spread in the postwar period, most obviously in the rise of rational choice theory across the social sciences.

Thomas Stapleford focuses more specifically on econometrics, that is, the creation, use, and testing of mathematical models of economic

phenomena. During the twentieth century, econometrics became increasingly important within the discipline of economics. Today most professional economists, especially those who work outside of higher education, spend most of their time on econometrics. Stapleford begins by noting that the combination of formal models and statistical analysis marks econometrics as quintessentially modernist. Nonetheless, he continues, the rise of econometrics was not straightforward, and its role and content did not go uncontested. The development of econometrics in Britain and the United States differed in large part as a result of the respective political and economic contexts.

Britain and the United States both experienced the rise of methodological (or epistemic) modernism as the dominant response to social and economic unrest and the related worry that existing forms of social knowledge could not adequately address modern problems. Econometrics arose in both countries as one of many modernist attempts to reconstruct the social sciences on a new and more scientific footing. Nonetheless, the differences between the American and British cases are striking. Econometrics made extraordinarily rapid progress in the United States between the wars. In contrast, although British economists adopted the broader methodological modernism discussed by Backhouse, the narrower subfield of econometrics remained a minority pursuit there until after World War II. Stapleford explains the early and extensive rise of econometrics within the United States by appealing to the American economy and especially the American political system. He argues that American corporations were larger than their British counterparts, and they also had more rationalized systems of management. They were, therefore, more in need of, and also better able to support, the kind of quantitative research that was undertaken at Harvard's Business School. More importantly still, Stapleford continues, the dominance of the Treasury within British government made it difficult for new types of economics to find institutional space. In the United States, the New Deal reformers fought an ideological battle with their conservative opponents in which they presented themselves as offering neutral theories that were supported by statistical data. In contrast, British reformers did not need large-scale statistical analysis to make their case to the public and to politicians; the key for them was, instead, the commitment of an elite group of Treasury officials and government ministers.

Modernist economic theory gave a central place to the concept of utility both in its general use of "utility maximization" and in its more specific appeals to "marginal utility." The concept of utility was one of the main bridges from the mechanistic social theorizing of the Enlightenment to the formalism of methodological modernism. In her chapter, Cathy Gere

explores the legacy of nineteenth-century concepts of utility not in economics, but in the behaviorist psychology of the twentieth century. Within economics, W. S. Jevons helped to make the relationship between utility and rationality an important tenet of a major strand of neoclassical thinking. Jevons effectively tied rationality to the minimization of pain and the maximization pleasure. In contrast, behavioral psychology generally depicts behavior and utility in ways that avoid conceptual ties to rationality. Behavioral psychologists wanted to explore human behavior in much the same way as scientists seemed to be studying animal behavior. They did not want to explain human action by showing it to be – or assuming it to be – an expression of rationality. On the contrary, they wanted to explain behavior in terms of biological instincts. Rational choice and free will thus gave way, in their work, to sensations and drives. They believed that humans are driven to act by sensations of pain and pleasure.

Gere begins her chapter by showing how the discourse of utilitarianism spread across psychology, economics, and evolutionary theory. She then traces the migration of utilitarian psychology from Britain to the United States. At Harvard, Edward Thorndike explored the effects of reward and punishment on dogs and cats. His work provided the basis for the behaviorism associated with B. F. Skinner. As Skinner's behaviorism was wedded to modernist and even positivist ideas, its critics sometimes raised humanist and historicist objections to it. Daniel Brower complained that behaviorism was static and atomistic and that it neglected questions of value. Gere emphasizes here that most of Skinner's critics objected principally to the way the scientism of behaviorism undercut all interest in the meaning of human actions. They complained that behaviorism left perilously little room for concepts, judgments, values, intentions, and beliefs. The decline of behaviorism owed something to these criticisms. Arguably, however, behaviorism's decline was primarily a result of the ideological imperatives of the Cold War. During the height of the Cold War, many social scientists championed freedom and choice in part because these were being projected as core Western values. Indeed, Gere concludes her chapter by suggesting that the end of the Cold War has created a space within which behaviorism has again started to flourish. The currently fashionable field of behavioral economics once again appeals to psychological, neurological, and evolutionary drives to explain human action.

If Skinner's behaviorism drew on positivism, sociological approaches to action typically remained tied to methodological modernism throughout the interwar period. Indeed, as Perrin Selcer argues, while most sociologists were modernists, they rejected the scientism of the positivists. More

generally, sociologists often saw their discipline as both a social science and a social therapy. They wanted sociology to become a popular knowledge that would enable people to see and act differently. Some of them were firmly committed to the idea that sociology could foster more just and more democratic social relations. Selcer emphasizes here that sociology was a response to modernity, its social problems, and its erosion of traditional narratives and practices. Early sociologists hoped that the objective assessments of formal scientific knowledge could act as guides in ways elder forms of social knowledge no longer could. Much of Selcer's chapter thus traces the persistence of a reformist ambition within methodological modernism. This reformism appears in the work of early twentieth-century thinkers such as L. T. Hobhouse, in the creation of professional associations in Britain and the United States, and through policy initiatives such as those of the New Deal.

Although the discipline of international relations contained a similar reformism, Ian Hall and I focus more on the postwar confrontation between modernist and positivist agendas. Between 1918 and 1950, scholars of international relations had to tailor their reformism to fit the rising tides of modernism and positivism. Like their counterparts in sociology, they generally based their reformism on a methodological modernism that sought midlevel theories and practical knowledge, not the general theories favored by positivists. They diagnosed an illness of excessive positivist abstraction and prescribed a regime of more modest theorizing. Here Hall and I draw attention to notable differences between Britain and the United States. In the United States, there has been a growing polarization between, on the one side, positivists and rational choice theorists, and on the other, the methodological modernism that is today common among institutionalists and constructivists. In Britain, methodological modernists have not faced any significant positivist challenge. Instead, they have been engaged in debate mainly by more reactionary aesthetic modernists, more Marxist structuralists, and more explicitly normative thinkers.

Hunter Heyck divides the history of modernism in the administrative sciences into three broad periods. The first period, lasting from the 1880s to the interwar decades, was one of incipient modernism. Modernist ideas spread widely, but they did so largely in the absence of a movement to establish administration as a distinctive intellectual discipline. Heyck reminds us here, following the chapters by Stapleton and Selcer, that one of the main drivers of modernism was the attempt to craft a new type of social science that was capable of addressing the distinctive problems of the modern world with its high levels of interdependence and its rapid changes. The high modernism of the second period lasted from the