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## INTRODUCTION

## Writing the History of Social Science

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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

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Claude Blanckaert, “L’Histoire des sciences de l’homme. Principes et périodisation,” and Fernando Vidal, “La ‘science de l’homme’: Désirs d’unité et juxtapositions encyclopédiques,” in *L’Histoire des sciences de l’homme: Trajectoire, enjeux et questions vives*, ed. Claude Blanckaert, Loïc Blondiaux, Laurent Loty, Marc Renneville, and Nathalie Richard (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), pp. 23–60, 61–78.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Smith, *The Fontana History of the Human Sciences* (London: Fontana Press, 1997). (In the United States, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences*.)

pursuit of knowledge. Early-nineteenth-century social science was bound up with this same endeavor. Few in 1830 doubted that political economy was a science; even its critics attacked it on other grounds. Politics had reasonable claims to be a science, as did theology; so it was not immoderate for inchoate fields like sociology, anthropology, or statistics to march under the same banner. In German, *Wissenschaft* imposed more strenuous requirements, but somewhat different ones. There, the model science was philology, a linguistic and literary study, whose dignity derived from its relation to an important subject area and its use of rigorous, scholarly methods. The modern practice of attacking fields of inquiry by denying their scientific credentials was uncommon until late in the nineteenth century, and it remains more plausible in English than in most other languages.

The possibility of a more restricted meaning of “science” emerged in the same period, and debates about the status of social knowledge were centrally involved in defining it. Consider the role of social science in the origins of modern philosophy of science. In the 1820s, Comte initiated a massive effort to define the methods and historical progression of the sciences. His main purpose was to announce the discovery, and define the standing, of sociology. He rejected decisively the idea that social science should adopt the same methods as astronomy, physics, or physiology. Yet at the same time he defined a hierarchy of knowledge, with social science dependent for its formulation on all the sciences that had gone before. And despite his claims for the inclusion of social knowledge, he made of “science” something special and exclusive. There had been, he argued, no science of physics before the seventeenth century, no true chemistry before Lavoisier. The origins of physiology were still more recent, and the founder of scientific sociology was, to cast aside false modesty, himself. Theology and metaphysics were not part of positive science, but its predecessors and its antithesis. Law, literature, and rhetoric could never occupy this hallowed ground. Thus, while Comte formulated his philosophy in order to vindicate sociology and to define its place within science, he insisted also on a highly restrictive sense of “science,” a standard the social sciences could not easily meet.

In practice, the natural sciences don’t conform well to philosophical prescriptions either. But Comte’s language, echoed and elaborated by Mill, encouraged the idea that science stands for a methodological ideal, which social science has but imperfectly realized. In scholarly and popular discussions of science, including discussions of the history of science, social science has often been regarded as an ambiguous case, and partly for that reason as a marginal one. We might put this differently. Social science is, in a way, a *doppelgänger* of science. The “doubles” of science – among them engineering and medicine as well as social science – represent the practicality of science, and so have embodied much of its significance for the larger culture. They have often been less abstract and more engaged, thereby testing the boundaries of science. These applications and extensions have sometimes been embraced and

sometimes shunned by those who speak for science. In part because of its very marginality, social science has taken the scientific ideal very seriously, and if that ideal fails as description, it retains a certain normative potency. The “scientific method,” for example, has been of particular interest to social scientists questing for the mastery or certainty of “true” science. Talk of method in natural science has been shaped in part by these social discussions, though scientists often invoke method to explain why social disciplines are not scientific. Historians and philosophers of science often argue, and rightly, that nothing like a rigorous or unitary method is to be found in the actual practice of science, but that does not make such talk inconsequential. It supports the prestige of science, helps to shape its identity, and sometimes forms its conscience.

In historical writing, the disposition to exclude has traditionally been a powerful one. Histories of science written by natural scientists often omit the social disciplines entirely. Philosophical histories of science have often undertaken first to study the most successful fields, which could then serve as models for the rest. The new professional historians of science had begun by the 1960s to reshape the field in ways that would seem to favor a greater inclusiveness. They refused to take for granted the narrative of ceaseless progress that had guided most of their predecessors. They wanted to treat their topic naturalistically, to avoid enshrining it as a privileged category. This has come to mean viewing science through the lens of historicism, as a social formation, to be studied as one would study other social formations. Especially since the 1970s, historians have often taken a more critical view of science than is customary among scientists themselves. Many have wanted to understand the validity of science in relation to the shared assumptions and material and social practices of particular communities, not as timeless and transcendental truth. They have been especially critical of what George W. Stocking, Jr., the historian of anthropology, first referred to as the Whig interpretation of science.<sup>3</sup> The name derives, by analogy, from a complacent view of British political history, characterized in a well-known study by Herbert Butterfield. The Whig view of science regards discoveries that comport with our current knowledge as natural and laudable, and condemns the prejudices and misconceptions that could have led scientists to believe what we now take to be false. Since the 1960s, the conventional practice has been to avoid this teleological view of scientific progress, insisting instead on what is called “symmetry” of explanation.

Historical writing on science has, nevertheless, continued to recognize in practice, if not always in theory, a conventional hierarchy of the sciences. Before 1960, historians of science worked mainly on medieval or early modern astronomy, mechanics, and optics, generally understood as the points of

<sup>3</sup> George W. Stocking, Jr., “On the Limits of ‘Presentism’ and ‘Historicism’ in the Historiography of the Behavioral Sciences” (1965), in his *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968), pp. 1–12.

origin for modern science. Modern physical science rose to prominence in the historical writing of the 1960s and 1970s, and the history of biology has flourished since 1970. The social sciences, like the applied and engineering sciences, have been accepted into the history of science more slowly, and have participated only partially in its dynamic. The subordinate status of social science is replicated in its historiography, which is often regarded as less advanced than that of science proper.

Thomas S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) helped to support and yet also to erase that separation. Kuhn noted that it was in part the absence of agreement in the social sciences that had alerted him to the existence of paradigms in the natural sciences – agreed-upon frameworks of theory and practice that enabled and constrained the normal practice of science. Yet he later blurred the bright line he had previously drawn, and his signal demonstration of the historical construction of science has stimulated inquiry into the social sciences, as well.<sup>4</sup>

The debate between “internalist” and “externalist” analysis in sociology and the history of science has had important implications for the standing of social science. During the 1970s, “externalism” generally meant an emphasis on the development of scientific institutions, as an alternative to a focus on scientific ideas. Paradoxically, the institutions in question in these “externalist” accounts were scientific ones, and were often treated as autonomous. In a way, this implied a narrower understanding of science than that reflected in some of the older intellectual histories that linked scientific conceptions to broadly philosophical ideas – and also one that tended to exclude social science. Kuhn's name – increasingly against his own inclinations – was usually invoked by the externalists in this notoriously slippery debate, and their narrow focus drew some support from his work, which concentrated on the character of scientific communities and left unspecified their relationship to wider intellectual and political currents. By 1980, “externalism” was more likely to refer to attempts to use social factors to explain the acceptance of new scientific truth claims. But most advocates of this “new” sociology of science sought something more impressive than the “social construction” of social science, which was often criticized in related terms. And their program has tended increasingly to a micro-view of laboratories as sites of a distinctive set of discourses and of their own special material cultures. It may be questioned who is really the “internalist.”

The history of the social sciences, now formalized by a Forum on the History of the Human Sciences within the History of Science Society, is distinguished by its close attention to methods and ideas, its careful

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. enlarged (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. viii, Postscript; Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions: Appraisals and Applications of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

contextualization, and its success in showing how the social sciences have mattered, avoiding the severe limits of purely local studies by bringing to bear on larger historical issues a tightly focused historical analysis. Its insights are not limited to social science. Much of the most exciting work on what we might call the culture and the sensibility of science has involved the history of the social sciences. The common context or shared cultures of natural and social investigation has been explored in historical studies of Malthus, Darwin, and social Darwinism; the sciences of energy and economics; statistical thinking and the development of quantitative methods; laboratory instrumentation and ideals of precision; and positivism and objectivity, to give only a few notable examples.<sup>5</sup>

Historians of science are not the only people to write the history of the social sciences. Practitioners of the social sciences were the first historians of their disciplines, although historical purpose was subordinated to social scientific aims. Writing history was generally an exercise in disciplinary self-definition, linking the modern discipline to selected forebears and legitimating a certain kind of disciplinary practice. A number of such texts achieved considerable historical distinction and have remained useful works, such as Edwin G. Boring's *History of Experimental Psychology* (1929, 1957), Joseph Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954), and Joseph Dorfman's five-volume *The Economic Mind in American Civilization* (1946–59). Still, these works suffered from Whiggish assumptions, and only Dorfman, an institutionalist, linked economic doctrine to a deep political and cultural context. They hardly made a dent in social scientists' ignorance of their own histories that had been one of the consequences of the dehistoricization of the social sciences, especially in the United States.

A new wave of historical interest that emerged in the 1960s, led by social scientists outside the mainstreams of their disciplines, saw the establishment of journals and university centers in the history of psychology and economics. Clinical psychologists formed the core of historical interest in psychology, with Robert I. Watson founding the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* (1965), a separate division of the American Psychological Association (1966), and a program at the University of New Hampshire (1967).<sup>6</sup> Economists at Duke University, long a center of historical

<sup>5</sup> Robert Young, *Darwin's Metaphor: Nature's Place in Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); M. Norton Wise, "Work and Waste: Political Economy and Natural Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *History of Science*, 27 (1989), 263–301, 391–449; and 28 (1990), 221–61; Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Jill Morawski, ed., *The Rise of Experimentation in American Psychology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); Ruth Benschop and Douwe Draaisma, "In Pursuit of Precision: The Calibration of Minds and Machines in Late Nineteenth-Century Psychology," *Annals of Science*, 57 (2000), 1–25.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell G. Ash, "The Self-Presentation of a Discipline: History of Psychology in the United States between Pedagogy and Scholarship," in *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories*, ed. Loren Graham, Wolf Lepenies, and Peter Weingart (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 143–89.



economics, and a group of English historians who had just begun a newsletter in the history of economic thought collaborated to found the journal *History of Political Economy* (1969). Deliberately choosing the term “political economy” to counter the narrowed scientific focus of postwar economics, they urged the value of history in an ahistorical and uncritically technocratic age.<sup>7</sup> The historical character of this work, and of subsequent initiatives in sociology,<sup>8</sup> varied widely, from the ahistorical search for elements useful to current theory and practice, to sophisticated research agendas informed by intellectual history and by the history and sociology of science.

These social science disciplinary milieux were soon invaded and augmented by a new generation of professional historians. George Stocking was a pioneer figure, a young historian studying ideas of race in the United States who was drawn deeply into the history of anthropology. Psychology also attracted considerable historical talent, and the interchange of historical sophistication and specialized social science knowledge raised the standards of scholarship. An historian like Stocking and a psychologist like the Canadian Kurt Danziger became, so to speak, fully bilingual.<sup>9</sup>

Most professional historians who became interested in the social sciences were less committed to the dialogue of a particular social science discipline than to the discourses of the historical profession and the public sphere. The social sciences emerged as an historical topic largely because of their influence on postwar society, governance, and culture, particularly in the United States.<sup>10</sup> With their technocratic expertise and scientific claims, the social sciences were also a ready target for the “unmasking” mood that followed the radicalism of the 1960s. Historians found in the social science project professional self-interest, elitist desires to exercise “social control,” and structural class and institutional constraints on knowledge.<sup>11</sup> By the 1980s, Foucault’s work had drawn attention to the coercion exercised by the very processes

<sup>7</sup> Crawford D. W. Goodwin, Joseph J. Spengler, and Robert S. Smith, “Avant-Propos”; “Robert Sidney Smith, 1904–1969”; and A. W. Coats, “Research Priorities in the History of Economics,” all in *History of Political Economy*, 1 (Spring 1969), 1–18.

<sup>8</sup> The *Journal of the History of Sociology* appeared intermittently from 1978 to 1987. *Cheiron* and the JHBS welcomed all of the social sciences, but only sociology and anthropology maintained a presence alongside psychology. A Research Committee in the History of Sociology and its newsletter, part of the International Sociological Association, also attracted American and European scholars.

<sup>9</sup> See particularly Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, Prefaces and chap. 1; and Danziger, *Constructing the Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Preface, Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Early and characteristic works are Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963); the essays of John C. Burnham, since collected in *Paths into American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876–1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> A sophisticated pioneering work in this vein is Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975).



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of rationality deployed by the human sciences.<sup>12</sup> Although a critical stance persisted, as these views were absorbed into historical discourse a wider variety of historians, with a wider spectrum of interpretive purposes, brought the history of the social sciences into their work.

Professional historians were not alone in bringing a new dimension of critique to the history of the social sciences. All participants in this diverse field were affected by the self-examination that gripped the humanities and social sciences during these decades, as knowledge claims in all the disciplines were thrown into doubt.<sup>13</sup> The reflexive interest of social scientists in their history was in part a facet of this larger movement of self-examination, which encouraged the effort of social scientists to come to grips with the historical character of their own domain. The historical discipline, always adjacent to and sometimes allied with the social sciences, scrutinized its own quest for objectivity and narrative strategies. Historicism was often figured as the philosophical ground of the new intellectual movement, but it did not valorize the professional historian's construction of experience.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, historians often used concepts and analyses borrowed from the social sciences, and narratives of modernity developed by the social sciences structured their stories. In the largest sense, the history of the social sciences invites reflection on the ways in which historians and social scientists are mutually implicated in each others' work.

We thus enter into the task of this volume with considerable pride in the intellectual tools at our command and a heightened awareness of their complexity and provisionality. As the work in this volume shows, there are now rich and powerful models for historical work in the social sciences. Authors in this field, however, have not always been aware of one another, and some perhaps have discovered only recently that all along they have been writing this species of prose. We believe that the history of social science is not merely a residual category, that its object has a cultural coherence, and that its pursuit is important for history. We have assembled authors from a variety of backgrounds and encouraged them to take seriously the methods and the intellectual content of social science, while considering at the same time the ways in which it has shaped and been shaped by a larger culture. The essays display differing balances among these objectives, as indeed they must.

We have planned this volume with an eye to the balance and range of the whole, and not just to the quality and comprehensiveness of the parts. It is, of course, impossible to be comprehensive. The four parts of this book

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Nikolas Rose, *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England, 1869–1939* (London: Routledge, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> See Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

concentrate on different regions and periods. Part I, on the origins of social science, is concerned mostly with Europe, while Part II, on the modern disciplines, and Part IV, a collection of case studies illustrating the larger societal importance of social science, are somewhat biased toward the United States. Because it was impossible in these parts to do justice to much of the rest of the world, we have included a separate section on the internationalization of the social sciences, with essays on eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Our authors themselves come from many disciplines, though most work in history and the history of science. Some topics, such as the development of the modern disciplines, draw heavily from historical writing in the United States, while others, especially those concerning the period before 1870, reflect British, French, and other European traditions of scholarship. The internationalization of social science, fittingly, engages historical understandings from around the world. Increasingly, the entire field of history of social science does so.

This volume in the Cambridge History of Science does not and could not present a collection of introductory articles representing the state of a well-demarcated field. We are aware of no work, whether singly or collectively authored, that has aspired to present such a wide historical view of the social sciences. The essays included here examine the history of the social sciences over some three centuries and many countries, attending to their knowledge and methods, the contexts of their origin and development, and the practices through which they have acted on the world. Our aim throughout has been to present the social disciplines not as a natural, inevitable solution to the organization of knowledge or the administration of modernity, but as problems – historically contingent, locally variable, always in flux, often contested, and yet as real sites of power in the world. We conceive of this book, too, not as reflecting the settled state of a field, but as something provisional, the product of a rich dialogue that, we hope, will be further advanced by its appearance.