

**“DISCIPLINE HISTORY”
AND “INTELLECTUAL HISTORY”
REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE**

RÉSUMÉ. — Cet article essaie de caractériser certains des problèmes qu'entraîne l'étude du passé des sciences sociales comme une série d' « histoires de disciplines » séparées, et confronte cette démarche avec celle qui, par contre, étudie aux origines des sciences sociales les activités de leurs praticiens potentiels, comme faisant partie d'une histoire intellectuelle plus large. S'appuyant sur ce contraste, il explore certaines des différences principales entre les recherches sur l'histoire des sciences sociales en France et dans les pays anglo-saxons, considérant brièvement les sources intellectuelles et institutionnelles de ces différences, et il conclut sur quelques modestes suggestions pratiques.

Part of the historian's function is to help us to escape from, or at least to loosen the hold of, those categories of thought we take so much for granted that we become almost unaware of their existence. In the intellectual life of modern societies, among the most insidious of the forces that shape our thinking are the institutional arrangements within which much of that life is conducted, and in Britain, France and comparable countries, the most important of those arrangements in the late twentieth century are institutions of higher education and research, which are most often divided into departments which are presumed to correspond to a particular so-called « discipline ».

This observation, which is in danger of seeming merely platitudinous, does offer a relevant starting-point for the reflections of a foreign observer upon certain aspects of the practice of the history of the social sciences in France today. For, what is most striking, at least to one reared in the Anglo-American intellectual world, is the extent to which enquiry into the past of « les sciences de l'homme » seems to take place within the categories provided by the *current* scientific practice of these « disciplines ». In what follows, I shall, first, try to summarize very briefly what seems to me the chief drawbacks of « discipline-history » ; secondly,

I shall attempt to characterize, with equal brevity, the conception of intellectual history which I take as the main contrast; and thirdly I shall offer a few brief practical observations. Needless to say, this can only be a personal and highly selective view, and it may therefore be as well to declare my own background openly at the start. My formation is very much that of an historian, trained in England and the United States, working primarily on English intellectual history; after doing some work on the history of political thought and the history of sociology, my interests have moved more towards the history of cultural and literary criticism. This naturally colours my perceptions, and I am well aware that if I had specialized in, say, linguistics or psychology, my perspective on current trends in the history of the « sciences de l'homme » would probably be very different.

The distinguishing mark of what I am calling « discipline history » is that it offers an account of the alleged historical development of an enterprise the identity of which is defined by the concerns of the current practitioners of a particular scientific field. For the most part it is assumed that such accounts will be written by those who are trained in the modern practice of the discipline, and that the relevant audience will be primarily composed of other practitioners. Let me say at once that I recognize that there can certainly be motives other than historical ones why the current practitioners of a social science may wish to engage with past writings which they choose to consider as earlier episodes in the development of their discipline. These other reasons — such as theory-construction, heuristic suggestiveness, tribal piety, or whatever — may be perfectly legitimate in themselves, and none of what I have to say applies to such exercises. I am here dealing only with what is referred to in the title of this special number of the *Revue de synthèse*, namely the *history* of the human and social sciences¹.

In this field, the most influential development in Britain and the United States in the last ten or fifteen years has been the attack on the assumptions of such discipline history. This development has generated a very large, and not always very profitable, methodological literature, some of which may be familiar to French readers. But the outcome has undeniably been to assemble a damning body of charges against such discipline history — charges of anachronism, of false continuity, of teleology, of indifference to context, of insensitive classifi-

1. Following the established usage in English, I shall hereafter speak of the « social sciences », though I am well aware that the terms in French and English do not represent co-extensive categories — for example, the study of literature would not normally be regarded among the « social sciences » in Britain or the United States.

cation, and so on. I hope I may be forgiven for quoting from an earlier characterization of the genre :

« In essence it consists in writing history backwards. The present theoretical consensus of the discipline, or possibly some polemical version of what that consensus should be, is in effect taken as definitive, and the past is then reconstituted as a teleology leading up to and fully manifested in it. Past authors are inducted into the canon of the discipline as precursors or forebears, and passed in review as though by a general distributing medals — and sometimes reprimands — at the end of a successful campaign, with the useful implied corollary that if the medals can be distributed the campaign must have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion and the discipline duly established. The list of canonical precursors, arrayed in chronological order, each wearing a label conveniently summarizing his "contribution", then becomes the history of the discipline in question. As with "official histories" in recently-established republics, rival teams of great predecessors may be assembled in this way, ostensibly to proclaim and honour a tradition of surprising antiquity, but in fact to legitimate the claims of the current protagonists in the struggle for power »².

At times, some of this literature may seem to be urging a kind of mindless historical positivism, but in the better contributions it has long been recognized that there can, strictly speaking, be no such thing as recovering the past *purely* in its own terms. All historical reconstruction involves selection, description and interpretation, and this inevitably means a certain element of translation into the language of the present. In its extreme form, the debate between the so-called « historicists » and the « presentists » has been almost as sterile as had been the earlier debate in the history of the natural sciences (in the English sense) between those favouring a purely « internalist » approach and those supposedly favouring a purely « externalist » approach (though strictly speaking there could have been no such thing). Nonetheless, this literature has established incontestably, with copious examples from earlier work in the field, the chief defects which are inherent in the genre of discipline-history³.

2. Stefan COLLINI, Donald WINCH, John BURROW, *That Noble Science of Politics : A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1983, p. 4.

3. Some of this literature is summarized, with reference primarily to philosophy, in Richard RORTY, Quentin SKINNER, Jerome SCHNEEWIND, eds, *Philosophy and its History*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1985 ; and, with reference primarily to sociology, in Robert Alun JONES, « On Understanding a Sociological Classic », *American Journal of Sociology*, 83, 1977, p. 279-319, and the debate in subsequent issues. There are also good discussions of these issues in J.W. BURROW, *Evolution and Society : A Study in Victorian Social Theory*,

The contrast that is implied by these criticisms is obviously with an approach which attempts to treat the history of the social sciences as part of a wider intellectual history, but it may be as well to characterize the nature of this attempt a little more fully since it may well not be quite so familiar to a French audience. I should say immediately that I take labels like « intellectual history » to be flags of convenience, not names of essences, and I certainly do not believe that those who apply the label to themselves have any monopoly on rightminded historical practices. Nor, it may be as well to emphasize from the start, does the term imply any commitment to so-called « idealist » or « intellectualist » strategies of explanation. On the contrary, one of the reasons why the term « intellectual history » seems to me preferable to « the history of ideas » is that it indicates more unambiguously that we are dealing with an aspect of human activity (as « economic history » and « political history » and so on do), and not with autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, happened only temporarily and accidentally to find anchorage in particular human minds (a suggestion encouraged by the German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte*, which drew so much from the history of philosophy in general and Hegel in particular). By recognizing the more reflective forms of the intellectual life of the past as a part of human activity, the best work in intellectual history precisely attempts to give their proper place to, rather than to deny the impact of, social forces, institutional frameworks, political pressures and so on⁴.

Still, the point of the contrast with discipline history may not be obvious : after all, it could be alleged that the history of ideas is nothing more than the history of the various disciplines of intellectual enquiry, and so is essentially an assemblage of « discipline-histories ». There is a certain plausibility in this for the most recent periods, where one could imagine (though it would be difficult) an intellectual history of the twentieth century being constructed by stringing together the history of science, the history of economics, the history of philosophy, the history of the novel, and so on. But, other difficulties aside, this would only be to provide the raw materials for an intellectual history of the period, and might, moreover, present them so much with an eye to subsequent developments in each of these fields as to be obstructive of a properly historical understanding of what it meant to think such thoughts at

Cambridge, C.U.P., 2nd ed., 1970, and in Geoffrey HAWTHORN, *Enlightenment and Despair : A History of Social Theory*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 2nd ed., 1986.

4. For a fuller discussion, see the symposium on « What is Intellectual History? », in *History Today*, 35, 1985.

the time. Who, for example, is best fitted to write the history of these activities? An economist *may* be able to reconstruct the proto-economic thought of the seventeenth century in a way that is not distorted by twentieth-century professional concerns, though his own intellectual formation presents an obvious obstacle to doing this well. But should we really look to a professor of medicine for an informed and historically sensitive account of the mediaeval theory of the four humours? Moreover, there would be the problem of the « spaces » between these various activities, or those bits of the intellectual life of the past that have not happened to mutate into labels over the doors of late-twentieth-century university departments: are we really to leave the history of astrology, so influential on so many of the most sophisticated minds of the Renaissance, to be written by gypsy ladies in tents?

Where discipline-history bores a « vertical » hole in the past (with all the consequent dangers of « tunnel-vision »), intellectual history attempts rather to excavate a « lateral » site, to explore the presuppositions, ramifications, and resonances of ideas, which may often involve pursuing them into neighbouring fields. To take a recent and fairly obvious example, one group of those working in the history of political economy have been led to try to understand the work of Adam Smith and his immediate successors in relation to the traditions of natural jurisprudence, the moral doctrines of civic humanism, the Augustan literature on manners and politeness, and so on⁵. Or, if I may take the example with which I am most familiar, a proper understanding of the work of Britain's first Professor of Sociology seemed to require pursuing connections across evolutionary theory, moral philosophy, political thought, Liberal party politics and much else⁶.

Obviously, I am making the contrast in an exaggerated way, between two ideal types: in practice, the outlines of the two types are not nearly as sharp as I am representing them, and good and bad work is done in both styles, depending, as ever, more upon the gifts and judgement of the individual historian than upon the methodological dispensation under which he or she is ostensibly working. Nonetheless, one cannot help but reflect upon the wider differences between the chief intellectual traditions of the relevant national cultures which may have contributed to shaping this contrast, such as it is. For example, the mainstream

5. See Istvan HONT, Michael IGNATIEFF, eds, *Wealth and Virtue: the Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1984, and the references cited there, especially to the work of Winch, Pocock, and Haakonssen.

6. S. COLLINI, *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880-1914*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1979.

of historiography in the United States in particular, and to a lesser extent in Britain, may have helped to encourage the development of a more historically-minded mentality in this sub-field. One could speculate that some of the trends that have been particularly influential in French historiography in recent decades have perhaps inhibited developments in this direction. The focus of those historians inspired by the second generation of the *Annales* school has generally tended to be on long-term social and economic trends, and even the concern with *mentalités* has directed attention away from the detailed examination of the intellectually complex products of a small elite. The influence, particularly strong in France, of Marxist and structuralist approaches has hardly tended to redress this imbalance. In addition, French historiography has tended to concentrate its most creative efforts on the period from the Middle Ages up to the Revolution; hence the nineteenth century, and particularly its intellectual history, has received a somewhat smaller share of the attention of French scholars than of their Anglo-American (and to some extent German) counterparts. And finally, the links of the history of science have tended in France to be rather more with philosophy than with history, whereas the detailed historical investigations of historians of science in Britain and America have been particularly suggestive for the practice of the history of the social sciences in these countries. Overall, one sees again how an overly Idealist form of history, which treats ideas as self-moving abstractions and finds in the history of philosophy the guiding thread of man's intellectual development, naturally generates by reaction a self-consciously « materialist » history which concentrates on the causal power of anonymous social and economic forces, to the exclusion of ideas and self-conscious human purposes. An adequately nuanced intellectual history may be one casualty of this exaggerated polarity, though by no means the only one.

One area in which some of these contrasts are illustrated particularly clearly is the history of political science (which I shall for the moment take to encompass the history of political thought, though those terms indicate a significant distinction in English-speaking countries). As an outsider I was struck by the fact that in the CNRS's « Colloque de définition sur l'histoire des sciences sociales et humaines » held in Paris in 1986, a report on the history of political science was the one notable omission. There were, no doubt, some purely accidental reasons for this, but it is also true that the institutional arrangement whereby political science in France has long been under the tutelage of the Facultés de droit is itself an interesting case of the ways in which different national institutional arrangements can have important intellectual consequences.

It may also be, as scholars like Pierre Favre and Jean Leca have recently surmised, that the central role of Sciences Po in France tended for a long time to reinforce an involvement with « practice » at the expense of the theoretical elaboration of a discipline, while, at a different level of explanation, it may be that Durkheimian sociology's development of some of the preoccupations of traditional moral philosophy (and the considerable short-term success of its proponents in infiltrating certain parts of the higher education system) may have met some of the political-intellectual needs of the Third Republic in ways which in other countries found satisfaction in a « science of politics ». But whatever the historical explanation, this is a subject which would figure very prominently in any comparable stock-taking exercise in the history of the social sciences in Britain or the U.S.A., not only because of the existence of long-established and prestigious university departments, but also because of its natural link with the area of the history of political thought.

This last is an area of enquiry which has particularly flourished in English-speaking countries in the last couple of decades, and it marks the point of greatest contrast with intellectual developments in France. Not only are there the usual external indicators of burgeoning scholarly activity, in terms of the quantity of work produced and the number of new journals, conferences and professional organizations⁷, but work in this area, notably by J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, has been widely influential on neighbouring areas in the history of the social sciences⁸. It may be significant that most of the best work in this area in recent years has been done by those trained in history rather than political science; this in turn reflects the fact that for a long time the history of political thought was the one kind of intellectual history which the more positivistic political historians could countenance (out of a belief, often mistaken, that political thought had influenced political practice and therefore « mattered »); but it has meant that this work has been distinguished precisely by the way in which it has located those texts which, for a variety of historical reasons, interesting in themselves, had become recognized as the « canon » of great texts in political theory, in a detailed historical context as part of the political and intellectual life of the period in which they were written. And by

7. For details, one might consult not only such journals as *History of Political Thought* or *Political Theory*, but also the *Newsletter* of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought.

8. For a, somewhat idiosyncratic, overview of these developments, see the first chapter in J. G. A. POCOCK's collection of essays : *Virtue, Commerce, and Manners*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1985.

its nature, political thought is a highly « impure » activity, scientifically speaking, with no hard and fast boundaries: the political thinking of previous generations was often carried on through the medium of what we should now categorize as theology or historiography, as well as in the more traditional categories of jurisprudence and moral philosophy, and all of this has tended to diminish the danger of such work being disfigured by the preoccupations of discipline history.

There are perhaps some signs that a re-alignment of the intellectual field is in train in France which may give political thought greater prominence. The recession of Marxism has allowed more attention to be devoted to questions of *political* thought, in the narrow sense, while signs of a disenchantment with some of the major systematic theoretical constructions of recent decades may mean that there is likely to be more interest in a loose-limbed genre like political thought. Figuratively speaking, Marx is giving way to Tocqueville, while wider political changes have already focussed more attention on Liberalism and its somewhat neglected history in France during the nineteenth century, and this may prove to be a particularly fruitful development for historians of the social sciences in that this will produce more detailed studies of those « moral and political sciences » so called, which were the matrix for so much of what has subsequently developed into more specialized disciplines.

A fuller survey of the contrasts between the state of this field in France and in the English-speaking countries would have to pay more attention to those areas whose history has been particularly well cultivated in the latter countries, even where the framework of « discipline history » had remained dominant until very recently. Economics, for example, has long had a more prominent position in political and intellectual life in Britain than in France, and it has been accompanied by a distinguished tradition of work on the « internalist » history of the science. In recent years, more wide-ranging and historically sensitive studies have appeared, setting high standards for the history of neighbouring social sciences⁹. By contrast, sociology had only a very tenuous hold in higher education in Britain before the 1960s, and its history has been relatively poorly explored there (the situation had long been different in the United States, where something called « sociology » had served as a vehicle for practical social concerns of various kinds). This is an area which has been cultivated with particular success in France,

9. For an example of the best kind of work produced in this vein, see D. WINCH, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1978. The journal *History of Political Economy*, started in 1971, has in general maintained an exceptionally high quality of contributions.

not least through the internationally recognized researches of the Groupe d'études durkheimiennes.

Turning to more practical considerations, one has to recognize the possibility that under present arrangements research will be carried out in the spirit of that « ghetto mentality », that defiant isolation within the confines of one discipline, which is a constant danger in starting from the organizational base of existing disciplines, and which spirit was not absent from, for example, some of the papers presented to the CNRS colloquium that I mentioned earlier. At the risk of spelling out the obvious, it may be worth indicating some of the ways in which it would be more fruitful to focus upon what enquiries in different fields in the history of the social sciences may have in common. Five headings immediately suggest themselves.

First of all, there is the question of institutionalization. It would be foolish for those few specialists in each of the separate branches of the history of the social sciences not to avail themselves of the large literature, both theoretical (or at least concerned with models constructed at a reasonable level of abstraction) and empirical, which deals with the common processes at work, the way different disciplines encountered similar obstacles which entailed comparable consequences for the subsequent practice of the activity, and so on. In particular, there has been a great deal of work in the last couple of decades on the expansion and diversification of higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period that was so crucial for the initial establishment of several social sciences¹⁰. And of course, existing studies of the history of one discipline can facilitate the task of those concerned with the institutionalization of other disciplines : for example, historians of archaeology in France have complained recently that little work has yet been done on the academic establishment of the subject, but in a sense some preparatory work may already have been done in studies on the growth of ancient history or of palaeontology or even of classical literature.

A second heading which overlaps but is distinct from the first is that of professionalization, a theme that has been particularly extensively explored in the United States. Here there are common questions about the social role of intellectuals and their relations to the category of « the professions » (initially, in Britain, « the liberal professions », a

10. There is a useful guide to much of this literature in K. JARAUSCH, ed., *The Transformation of the Higher Learning 1860-1930*, Stuttgart, Cotta, 1983. A still wider perspective is taken by Lawrence STONE, ed., *The University in Society*, 2 vols, London, O.U.P., 1975.

mark of gentility that later groups greatly aspired to), as well as about the claims to authority licensed by the possession of a certain body of knowledge, or about the tensions and conflicts between « amateurs » and « professionals » in the cultivation of a common enterprise, and so on. This is another area where the detailed historical researches of Anglo-American historians of the natural sciences have left a residue which is full of suggestiveness for historians of the social sciences.

A third heading is provided by the question of sources, for even if one approaches the material with the assumptions of « discipline-history », it soon becomes clear that the enquiry cannot be confined to one self-contained set of sources. It is no doubt important that institutions and professional bodies should devote their energies to building up archival collections relevant to their history, but of course in many cases it is not entirely clear to which discipline these materials « belong ». In fact, the same can be said about the editing and reprinting of rare books : should any *one* modern discipline be exclusively responsible for the publishing of works by, say, seventeenth-century natural lawyers, or eighteenth-century travel writers, or nineteenth-century philosophers of history ? The « ghetto mentality » can simply be counter-productive here.

A fourth and no less obvious heading is that of what is usually termed « methodology ». Most of the fundamental theoretical and epistemological problems encountered in the course of reflecting on the attempt to reconstruct the history of any one of the social sciences are shared across the field as a whole. The whole question of the definition of « science », the status of the discourse of the observer, the conceptualization of « the social », the disputes about relativism, explanation, and interpretation — all these issues are treated in a technical and sophisticated body of philosophical literature which those working with the limits of the history of any single discipline ignore only at the price of appearing both naive and presumptuous.

My fifth and final heading is that of international comparison. Of course, to urge that research should be pursued on a comparative basis is to risk repeating one of the emptiest academic platitudes. No one disagrees with the principle ; very few find it possible to carry out genuinely comparative research in practice. But it has to be said that there can be no history of the social sciences which is not at least implicitly comparative. None of these intellectual activities, not even the study of literature, has been purely internal to one culture. Sometimes, indeed, the crucial theoretical developments have been openly imported : the history of social psychology in France after 1945, for example, has to be treated to some extent as a domestication of

American models, and so some understanding of the function of this work in its original setting is obviously indispensable even for avoiding fundamental mis-characterizations in this episode of French social science. Clearly, fully elaborated comparative studies are rare, and they present exceptional difficulties; but one can at least hope that even where the *materials* to be worked on are exclusively French, the *perspective* of the researcher is enriched by reflections of a comparative kind. In particular, it would be important not to lose sight of the way that the historical strength or weakness of certain intellectual traditions or institutional arrangements in France (by comparison with other countries) may have affected the very characterization of the fields to be studied — for example, the immensely powerful institutional position and social prestige of law and, in a different way, of philosophy, the unusual prominence in French culture of geographical thought, the comparatively subordinate position of economics and political science, and so on.

Needless to say, it would be impertinent for me to offer any actual suggestions about the concrete measures that might be taken by those interested in the history of the social sciences in France, and anyway I have only a shamefully superficial acquaintance with work in several of the fields I have mentioned already. But as a foreign observer working for a short period among researchers in these fields in France, perhaps I may be permitted three general observations, especially since they bear upon the issues discussed at the CNRS colloquium referred to earlier.

The first concerns the delicate question of professional status and recognition which appears to be a matter of current concern among French scholars. The intensity of this concern obviously varies between disciplines (it seems, for example, to be very strong in psychology, perhaps partly because of the self-consciously « scientific » norms of the discipline as a whole, but rather less marked among anthropologists). My only observation is the predictable one that increasingly in Britain and the U.S.A. historians of social science appear to address themselves to the growing community of those interested in the *history* of these fields as such, whether they have been initially trained as historians or social scientists, and to obtain their recognition here rather than among current practitioners of the discipline. The example of the way in which the history of science developed in these countries may be relevant to this topic. When it was still a marginal activity cultivated by aberrant, failed or retired scientists, it rated very badly for resources, prestige, promotions and so on, but now that it is established as an activity in its own right, pursued without having its goals set by the

current practitioners of the natural sciences, it provides access to the highest academic and cultural honours. The relevant professional community for, say, the historian of sixteenth-century astronomy is after all provided not by practising astronomers, but by other historians of science and indeed sixteenth-century intellectual historians more generally, and a similar position may be developing in the history of the social sciences.

The second observation concerns the question of founding new journals specializing in the history of each discipline. In my own, admittedly somewhat eccentric, view it would actually be a greater contribution to the well-being of the world of international scholarship to *suppress* some existing reviews rather than to create new ones, but I recognize that this view may be dismissed as merely flippant. But as an outside observer I would strongly urge against the creation of any reviews which may reinforce the « ghetto mentality » referred to above, especially if the review was in practice to be further confined to French scholars alone. Contributing to existing *historical* journals is obviously one route to be recommended, and if, for various practical (or even political) reasons it is thought desirable to found a new review, my own preference would strongly be for a review devoted to the whole range of the history of the social and human sciences, rather than to have any pattern of separate reviews for separate disciplines. The common problems mentioned above provide some justification for this, and it may also be desirable in terms of obtaining international recognition, creating a professional community of scholars, and so on.

My third observation runs an even greater risk of seeming an impertinent intrusion into matters which are not my business, since it concerns the question of financial support for research and travel. It is certainly true that at many international conferences and scholarly gatherings the comparatively small number of French scholars present (even in fields in which they are well represented in terms of publications) is often explained by the fact that in general they do not have ready access to funds to support travel to such meetings. (In the past, the widely-remarked inward-looking parochialism of French cultural life may also have played its part.) I am well aware that the question is a complex one, but it may nonetheless be true that French researchers are in an exceptionally unfavourable position here. I am not just referring to the comparison with the U.S.A. where there are often large private funds available to support all kinds of research. Even in Britain, where (as many readers of this journal will no doubt be aware) university finances have been savagely restricted in the last few years, individual universities as well as central bodies like the British Academy and the Economic

and Social Research Council have made strenuous efforts to protect funds that are specifically designed to allow participation in meetings overseas. In a world where scholarship and research are becoming ever more international, the argument has to be made that it is a false economy to under-finance international contacts of this sort. The CNRS surely has a particularly strategic role here. If I have been expressing some disquiet about the implications of a concentration on « discipline history » for the development of the history of the social sciences in France, it is certainly not because I think the institutions which exist to organize research in other countries are superior to those existing in France. Quite to the contrary : the fulltime research posts supported by the CNRS are much envied in other countries, and it is precisely because the existence of the CNRS provides French scholarship with unrivalled opportunities, that it would be all the more pity if its own internal organization were in any way to inhibit it from realizing its potential contribution to this growing field of the history of the social sciences.

Stefan COLLINI,
University of Cambridge.