

What is Historical Social Science?

By Immanuel Wallerstein

In 1879, William Stanley Jevons, published the Second Edition, revised and enlarged, of *The Theory of Political Economy*. This was a basic textbook of marginalist economics, about to become the dominant position in British universities and soon thereafter in the rest of the Western world as well. It still is the dominant position. On page xiv of the Preface to this Second Edition, Jevons wrote:

Among minor alterations, I may mention the substitution for the name Political Economy of the single convenient term *Economics*. I cannot help thinking it would be well to discard, as quickly as possible, the old troublesome, double-worded name of our Science. Several authors have tried to introduce totally new names, such as Plutology, Chrematistics, Catallactics, &c. But why do we need anything better than Economics?

As we know, the term "economics" has prevailed. I enter a passing sigh of regret that Plutology was never adopted. Then we could all revel in the idea that we might be calling our colleagues Plutocrats.

Of what interest to us today is this decision by Jevons on terminology? I introduce it to illustrate a simple historical reality in the evolution of social science terminology. The story of the introduction into the modern university system of what we today call the social sciences involves a long terminological debate, which was in large part a debate about boundaries. From the middle of the eighteenth century until the very last decades of the nineteenth century, the number of names used in the structures of knowledge to describe the social sciences was in the hundreds at least. There was

little consensus and much murkiness. A large number of these names were compound names such as political economy.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, these several hundred names were reduced to a very few. The exact list is a matter of debate. My colleagues and I in the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences argued in our report, *Open the Social Sciences*, published in 1996, that the final list was really six: history, economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, and Oriental studies. Some might add psychology and geography to the list. But even so, the list is small.

In the period between the 1880's and 1945, this small list was consecrated in various ways: Universities created departments with these names. National and then international associations of scholars were founded, using these names. Scholarly journals were founded, using these names. And the great libraries of the world created categories based on these names. The rationale for this list was something we laid out in the Gulbenkian report, and I shall not reargue it here; the point is that this was the nomenclature that prevailed.

Now, after 1945, for reasons we argued in the Gulbenkian report, something happened. The list, which had been reduced from several hundred to a very small list, began to expand again. New names were created. And names combining two of the small list came into favor again. Indeed, one of them was political economy. And the mode of institutionalization was identical. There were new university departments or at least programs, using the new names. There were new scholarly associations, using the new names. There were new scholarly journals, using the new names. And there were new library categories, using the new names.

One of these new names was "historical social science." So, it seems to be reasonable to query what is intended by this new combined name. Charles Tilly would have been happy, I believe, to accept the label of historical social scientist. I would too,

and so no doubt would many others. But it does not follow that we all intend this term to signify the same thing.

In 1974, in the United States, the Social Science History Association was founded. It publishes a journal, *Social Science History*. It has been an active group. If one goes to its web site in 2008, one finds a "Welcome" that reads as follows: "The members of the Social Science History Association share a common interest in interdisciplinary and systematic approaches to historical research." The web site has no more elaborate exposition of what defines social science history. If we examine this sentence, the two key words, it seems to me, are "interdisciplinary" and "systematic."

The concept of interdisciplinarity has been around since at least the 1920's. It was encouraged by the Social Science Research Council in its activities and publications. But it only began to acquire resonance in the United States and then around the world in the 1960's. It then began to find competition in somewhat similar terms like multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity, and crossdisciplinarity. Personally, amidst the multiple competing definitions of each of these terms, I have never been able to discern the importance of the distinctions, which have always seemed to me a babble of irreality.

The point is that academia became awash in this discourse. And there is scarcely a university president today who does not boast that his/her university is promoting this virtuous avant-garde activity. There was one intellectual reality that prompted much of this discussion. It was the increasing sense among the three great nomothetic disciplines - economics, sociology, and political science - that their pervasive and dogmatic presentism accounted for much of their inability to probe intelligently the issues of the present. There was a call to make them more "historical" in their use of data and in their theorizing.

At the same time, more and more historians became uncomfortable with the degree to which their empiricism led to recordings of chronological sequences that, even if accurate, seemed to explain very little. So there grew up a call amongst them to "systematize" their analyses. This essentially meant that they had to undo their refusal ever to "generalize" and to utilize the systematic propositions that their nomothetic colleagues had proposed in trying to make sense of what had happened in different historical situations.

Putting these two trends together led to "social science history." Of course, as we know, as soon as some people started doing social science history, others came along to deconstruct this movement, to postmodernize knowledge, and to enter hermeneutic and/or linguistic turns. Interdisciplinarity was rejected in the name of rejecting disciplinarity. The advocates of the multiple "post-" doctrines seemed to advocate a form of knowledge construction in which each of us, writers and readers, mixed the paints as we wished. There was no system at all, just commitment.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, it seems that we may be post-post-ism, and back to debating the appropriate mix. The question is whether social science history is the right mix. Social science history has been, as far as I have seen, largely an attempt to expand the data base for the nomothetic trio, co-opting (if you will) the opposition, in the same way that the new economic history has been an attempt to apply the same quantitative techniques to earlier historical data without taking into account historical specificities.

I myself do not do social science history. I do historical social science. I am not in favor of any variant of multidisciplinary because, again as far as I can see, they all reinforce the boundaries of the traditional (that is, 1880-1945) boundaries of the disciplines by inviting each of them to contribute their special (and therefore distinctive) knowledge to a collective stew.

This will not do! It changes far too little. I have long argued that what we need, ad interim, is unidisciplinarity - the refusal of the *intellectual* relevance of the disciplinary boundaries created in the 1880-1945 period. I once wrote a short piece entitled "there is no such thing as sociology." I am willing to do the same for all the other social science disciplines. Or rather, I would write ones saying that "there is no longer such a thing as...." These categories made sense previously in that they reflected a social reality of the long nineteenth century. But we are now living in a different world social situation, and our boundary lines need to be constructed in the light of the existing world social situation. Since social science is a constructed vision of the world, it of course needs to be constantly reconstructed.

Disciplines are three quite different things. They are claims to defining specific intellectual boundaries as making intellectual sense. But they are also organizational constructs, the claim to turf. And finally they are cultures, the largely shared assumptions of persons trained in or associated with a certain intellectual set of boundaries and organizational turf. One of the problems about disciplines is that the three aspects of disciplines - intellectual, organizational, and cultural -are not necessarily congruent one with the other.

I believe that the intellectual definitions of the names we invented in the 1880-1945 period are no longer defensible as relevant to or useful for the understanding of social reality. I think my sense of this increasing irrelevance is widely shared, which is what has led to first multidisciplinarity and then post-disciplinarity, neither of which has provided an adequate intellectual substitute for the old set of boundaries.

The biggest problem is that the organizational boundaries have not grown weaker in the post-1945 period; they have grown much stronger. The way around this has been to create additional turfs, which accounts for the multiplication of names of disciplines. This of course poses not only a problem of intellectual and organizational coherence but an enormous financial strain on the university system. It makes deans,

presidents, and ministers of national education wildly anxious, and often flailing about, trying to reduce expanding costs amidst non-expanding intellectual gains.

Finally, cultural boundaries of the disciplines have been resistant to change. Much as many rail against the canons, the canons remain largely in place. The response to this has been to enlarge the list of canonic authors. The response of students to these enlarged lists has been to read less of the originals and more of the potted summaries of these canonic authors.

As you can see, I take a dim view of what has been going on. We find ourselves working in structures of knowledge that are wildly confused, intellectually not very useful, searching how to survive organizationally, and unsure of our cultural bearings. This is no way to face up to a world social situation that is itself undergoing chaotic turbulence.

I shall not repeat here my own views of the world-system's chaotic turbulence, where it is heading, and what are our actual historical choices. I will merely say that all those working in the domain of the historical social sciences today need to take a sober and sustained look at the state of the world-system and where it is heading. They then have to ask themselves how relevant is the work they are doing - not only in terms of the substantive issues they are asking but in terms of the epistemological assumptions they are using.

We all have to struggle against our organizational straightjackets, pierce our cultural limitations, and try to institute intellectual structures of knowledge that are going to be useful in meeting the challenge of the world-system's chaotic turbulence and the new world order into which we are moving. If we wish to honor Charles Tilly, that is how we can honor him and his work over the past half-century.