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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/1

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Jean-Michel Chapoulie introduces his useful framework for the history of the social and behavioral sciences with a wonderful quote by Clifford Geertz that perfectly illustrates the essay's main idea:

[I]f you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do [cited in Chapoulie 2009].

Indeed, in the past, historians of social science too often looked at what social scientists said they were doing, their programmatic statements, rather than examining their activities. The result was an overemphasis on epistemological issues (the “objectivity question”) at the expense of other important questions. But, as Chapoulie notes, recent decades have seen a proliferation of more sophisticated approaches to the history of social science. These new histories have gone beyond the discipline-centered framework of what he calls “conventional history,” which either focuses exclusively on the ideas of great thinkers with little historical context or offers self-serving, tendentious, and presentist narratives in order to justify current disciplinary trends.

It is in the context of these beneficial transformations in the history of social science that Chapoulie's framework makes sense: both as a way to codify what has been done in recent decades and to direct our attention to future research possibilities. He suggests that we begin our investigations by examining “concrete production activities, from those who participate in them in one way or another and the

institutions which they create or invest.” He perceives that a wide range of topics can stem from this focus on “concrete production activities,” including the study of research methods, institutional settings, funding, and the reception of social scientific knowledge by multiple audiences. Chapoulie suggests that we study not only those thinkers whose works are still read today but also those who were less prominent and whom time has forgotten; indeed, a recent article by Rohde [2009] suggests what we can gain by such an approach. Our focus, Chapoulie argues, should go well beyond the discipline. Instead we should turn our attention to the “system of interaction in which each discipline finds itself implicated.” When studying sociology, for example, we should examine its relationships “with journalism, social work, and the progressive reform movement with which sociology shares a part of the same market.” Placing social science within a wider historical context is particularly important, because social scientists “use notions borrowed from the social world studied.” Chapoulie indicates that we should still focus on the texts that social scientists produce, though these cannot be reduced to a simple “corpus of definitions and propositions.” We should investigate the rhetorical strategies employed in the texts as well as the arguments, and examine different kinds of texts such as anthropologists’ field notes in order to examine the process of production. Finally, Chapoulie insists that historians of social science approach their subjects with an open mind, without prejudging the issues, and hence always remain vigilant about ways in which historical knowledge might challenge our contemporary assumptions. This, of course, is always good advice for historians.

I find little to object to in Chapoulie’s framework. It usefully synthesizes many of the positive trends in the history of the social and behavioral sciences of the past twenty-five years. It helps clarify what it is that historians of social science do today. However, I would like to add two notes of caution; Chapoulie may well agree with these points, but I believe they need to be more explicitly incorporated into his framework. First, in our desire to escape the exclusive focus on disciplines that characterizes much inadequate historiography of social science, we should not forget the vital importance of disciplines in shaping social-scientific work. One only need look at the differences between such fields as sociology and economics today to see how disciplines produce very different ideas about the social world and approaches for studying it.

Second, as we address our attention to the many kinds of research topics Chapoulie suggests, we should remember the central importance to the history of social science of close readings of social scientific texts and critical understandings of the major social scientific ideas of the past. Simply reading older works of social science closely and with a historical eye often grants us important insights because the

meanings of such works are frequently distorted in current disciplinary discussions as social scientists frequently invoke older texts for authority rather than fully examining their meanings. Like all texts, works of social science are open to multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, reading such texts historically, with an awareness of the intentions of the author and the context of the arguments, can even offer fresh perspectives on current disciplinary debates. One example is Robert Adcock's recent intervention in the use of John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic* in current methodological debates within American political science. Adcock [2008] demonstrates that both sides of the debate have used Mill selectively. By focusing on the concerns that drove Mill to write his *Logic*, Adcock crafts an argument that seeks to engage "not only historians of thought, but also contemporary methodologists who would analyze and make prescriptions about the interplay of inductive and deductive moves in social science."

That brings me to the major question I wish to raise: What purposes can be served by the new history of social science? Chapoulie raises this issue in his conclusion but does not provide any answers. For this omission, he can be forgiven, as it is a question that can only be adequately answered in an article of its own. Nevertheless, it must be addressed. Chapoulie correctly notes that the older discipline-focused history served and continues to serve a distinct purpose in creating common disciplinary cultures. Indeed, the very fact that it does so leads one to question how easily it can be overcome. More importantly, however, one must ask about the purposes of this newer and more sophisticated history of social science. George Stocking [1968] argued long ago that if the history of social science is narrowly presentist, then it fails to adequately engage the past and hence serves no useful purpose. History then becomes, as Quentin Skinner [1969] once remarked, simply "a pack of tricks that we play on the dead." However, I worry that more sophisticated historians of social science such as Chapoulie may be so concerned about avoiding the dangers of presentism that they run the risk of antiquarianism. For those who teach in history departments, it may be enough to say that insights into the history of social science improve our understanding of the intellectual, cultural, and political contours of the modern world and thereby attune us to prominent features of our contemporary landscape. However, I am unsure that such an answer is adequate for social scientists engaged in the history of their own fields.

Because the history of social science as an enterprise is so often ignored and devalued within the social sciences, it is particularly important that historians of social science explicitly state the ways in which their work can improve present-day practice. I might briefly suggest that the answer lies in the kind of reflexivity that history can offer. It can help today's social scientists gain greater self-consciousness regarding the methods and ideas they employ. It attunes them to the wider context in which they

produce their work. It helps them think about the kinds of institutional structures that best sustain particular kinds of scholarship; one thinks here of Robert Merton's historical exploration of the kinds of scientific institutions that promote serendipitous discoveries [Merton 2004]. Knowledge of history of their fields can remind social scientists that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel; it can correct for the sort of disciplinary forgetting that leads social scientists to exaggerate the novelty of their work. Indeed, social scientists reading about the history of their field might even discover ideas and methods that have been unjustly forgotten and could be applied in current research. Of course, the question of what purposes the history of social science can serve is intimately connected with the question of what purposes social science as a whole can and should serve today. Historical study is one means of raising this crucial question. What social scientists learn from studying their past can improve what they do today. Historians of social science should not be afraid to make that case.

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Abstract: Critical against conventional disciplinary history of social science, this essay presents an analytical framework stemming from historical research of the author on Chicago sociology and french sociology after 1945. The proposed point of departure for research in the history of social sciences is similar to the basic perspective of history (as proposed by Lucien Febvre) or sociology of work in Everett Hughes' style: social sciences are to be considered as social practices whose primary ends are the production of texts, with historical and thus changing properties. Investigations must look at every categories concerned directly or indirectly (or even in abstentia) with the production of social sciences: researcher, concurrent researcher of other specialties or disciplines, scholarly and learned institutions, those who finance research, general audiences, etc.). Heterogeneous elements must be taken into account: the documentary sources, the way of processing documentation, the rhetoric, the categories of analyses and questioning, the social contexts in which the research is carried out, the biographical experience of producers, the contexts of publication and reception. As an illustration of the possible extensions of this approach, a rapid presentation is given of the use made in research on the Chicago tradition of certain distinctions to analyze the diffusion of works and the relations between generations of researchers.

Keywords: history of social science, historical methodology, academic disciplines, intellectual history, presentism.

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