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Rejoinder to Daniel Geary, Johan Heilbron, Jennifer Platt, and Alan Sica

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by Jean-Michel Chapoulie

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All texts are ambiguous. My paper is no exception. I am grateful to Daniel Geary, Jennifer Platt, Alan Sica, and Johan Heilbron for their commentaries, which develop what is implicit in my paper. For instance, I agree unhesitatingly with the distinction introduced by Heilbron between two sources of conventional history of the social sciences, with the remarks by Platt about some uses of knowledge the researcher can borrow from his own ethnographic experience, and with Geary's conception of the uses of real history of the social sciences.

Part of ambiguousness of texts disappears if you pay attention to the audience and guess the implicit intents of the author. I thought this paper would be read by (few) sociologists, not necessarily doing research in the history of sociology and that's why it develops the risks of familiarity and not those of distance between the researcher and its subject (on this point I like to mention Davis 1973). As a tribute to Platt's work, I intended to sketch out a framework appropriate for research in the history of the social sciences and suggest some questions for new research in this field. It's a kind of personal synthesis about what we, scientists in Jennifer's informal circle, have learnt from research with a new empirical orientation far from traditional history of ideas. I did not want to draw a program suited for every topic, but only to suggest ideas grounded on reflections about past errors. Moreover I am sure this framework is too narrow: it is grounded mainly on research on the United States, Great Britain, and France.

One point of disagreement with probably all commentaries is about the use and the intellectual status of labels as “sociology,” “historical sociology,” “history of sociology,” “history,” etc. These labels point out empirical entities (people, small groups, research programs, etc.) more or less clearly defined in each place and time. Of course there are differences of craft between, for instance, historians and sociologists (and the first of them being, to quote Sica approvingly, the “suffocating addiction to the immediate present” of almost all sociologists). But as students of the also loosely defined world of social sciences, we do not need to take too seriously these labels¹. We must pay great attention to the frontiers of the different disciplines and fields – a very important feature – but we must not work within their framework. For instance, the very idea of a history of sociology, or even of the social sciences, is not a good one: it is only a common label to give a crude idea of our subject matter. There is however a permanent tendency to forget this evidence, because our audiences are almost always mainly interested in one of the disciplines of social sciences and do not care about the other ones. One of the main targets of my paper was the reification of disciplines.

It is here that the notion of “system of interaction” can be useful. It does not solve any problem, but it reminds us that, when we begin to study an object, we never know precisely the universes we need to investigate: we have to discover them. It is a very simple idea, and it suffices to see that there is no history of sociology (for instance) because sociology is tightly linked with other worlds (other disciplines in the social and natural sciences, social work, administration, etc.), *specifically* in each historical circumstances. That is why I – contrary to Heilbron – do not think Bourdieu’s idea of “field” is very fruitful for the study of social sciences. I have some familiarity with this idea – I remember a conversation in the late 1960s with Bourdieu who read with enthusiasm a textbook about theoretical physics where he found the idea. I have never been convinced that the representation suggested by the term “field” is quite appropriate for a universe such as sociology which has little autonomy, contrary to universes as the French literature of the latest two centuries, mathematics or physics.

Sica is very pessimistic about the future of archives for the history of the social sciences in America². I agree with his appreciation as regards the 1970s and later: technologies of telephone, replacing correspondances, and computers will let few documents similar to those we have for the periods before the 1960s, but the same

¹ In fact I am among those convinced there is no epistemological difference between sociology, history, anthropology, political science etc. – only historical and national differences separate the so-called disciplines.

² Contrary to Sica’s supposition, my use of « concrete » has nothing to do with Althusser. I use « concrete research practices » to underline the necessity of empirical inquiry on the research practices: descriptions taken from textbooks in methodology and testimonies of researchers are evidently not sufficient.

applies to other places and fields of inquiry (in France, the history of education, my main field of research). For the precedent period (1850-1950), archives about universities and the social sciences are much more richer in America than in France – the best illustration is in some of the studies I refer to in my paper and others of similar interest. It is true that, in the United States, archives are scattered in different places and it is not easy to consult them for a researcher who has institutional duties. It is also true that history of the social sciences is a topic you have better to choose when you have a tenure – but the same applies to France and probably almost everywhere. Finally, one of the main qualities of historian lies in the “discovery” of new sources. No reason to think that some future historians of the social sciences will not succeed in finding some.

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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 sciences, epistemology, methodology, texts of the social sciences.

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