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# Large Topics and Hard Methodological Decisions

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# Large Topics and Hard Methodological Decisions

by Jennifer Platt

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This is a rich and important book, demonstrating long and thorough data-collection and methodologically self-conscious analyses that add significantly to our knowledge [see Fleck 2011]. It presents important data comparing the careers of German-speaking emigrant and non-emigrant social scientists, and revealing aspects of the Frankfurt school's lives shown in archives at the American end which cast a very different light on them from that shown in the German archives used by previous writers, while building a novel argument about the significance of the role played in intellectual change by some of the social arrangements of academic life. That even such valuable work can leave us with some reservations about the choices made shows not its weaknesses, but the nature of the problems that anyone researching similar areas will face. This comment will focus its main attention on those issues.

First, an issue about the remit of the book. Is it really about the social sciences in general, as suggested by its title and by the description on p. 4 of its sample of "German-speaking social scientists," or is it about sociologists in particular, as implied by the description on p. 5 of the sample as "sociologists"? The author's quotation marks for "sociologists" draw attention to the problem, discussed fully a little further on in the book: what counts as a sociologist? This problem arises regularly when one is studying stages before the discipline was fully institutionalised. Fleck points out that in the German-language world at the time sociology was not yet so clearly institutionalised, patterns of study often cut across the boundary between sociology and not-sociology, and there was no formal course of sociological studies

leading to a qualification. Moreover, many cases in his sample were of people who only became “sociologists” after leaving their home country. The difficulty is in the literature sometimes over-ridden by simply treating, say, Ibn Khaldun or Tocqueville as a sociologist, although one can be certain that in their time they could not have been known as such, because their work fits one’s definition of the field of intellectual activity; that is all right as long as one recognises the implications of that decision. (I do not recall ever seeing a historical study which chose to regard someone with a full professorship of sociology at a recognised university as not being a sociologist because their work did not fit the author’s definition! But was Gary Becker “really” a sociologist when his post was in economics, or did he instantaneously become one when he moved into the sociology department?). One reason for Fleck choosing a rather broad definition is very specific to this book’s agenda: to ensure that there is as little bias possible towards emigrants or non-emigrants. For other purposes, another decision might be equally or more appropriately made.

Second, an issue about the composition of the whole book. Data collected over many years, while pursuing a full academic career, naturally generate conference papers and journal articles as the work proceeds, and for a successful career must do so. The earlier ones are of course written without knowing what data, and new ideas raised by them, will be dealt with in the later ones. When one comes to create a book, which may not have been envisaged from the start, of course one puts together the papers already written, hoping not to have to change anything too radically, and fitting them into an intellectual framework which shows how their themes and findings are interrelated, and reaches general conclusions. The more and better material one has, the harder this is! There is so much in Fleck’s book that I found it hard to be sure where we were going until it got near the end. Chapter 4, for instance, which presents important and interesting data on Austrian and German social scientists and their careers, has no general statement about the relevance of this to the argument of the book as a whole. Maybe more explanatory contextualization early in the book would have helped? Maybe it would have been even better as two books? I think that he has occasionally succumbed to the temptation to put too much in, so that some parts of the material are very interesting to those who are interested in that kind of thing, but not essential to its central theme. To make one’s book a treasure-house of small finds along the way helps to sustain the reader’s attention, but does not do anything to sharpen its focus on the links between parts.

A particularly impressive feature of the book is the sample of more than 800 “sociologists” – not all of whom were initially identified as such – from the German-speaking countries, including obscure and academically unsuccessful ones who have left little written trace, correcting a common omission which is hard to avoid. It could

not totally solve the problem of the counterfactual conditional – what would have happened if the emigration had not taken place – but it certainly helped. It made it practical to develop a collective biography of the generations which suffered the impact of Nazism, distinguishing those who emigrated from those who did not, and Austrians from Germans. But an inevitable consequence of this choice is that for many members of the sample data are missing on some points; only when the absence of data is in itself a relevant datum – for instance, that this person has had no publications in sociological journals – does this not matter in principle (though mattering in practice may be another question).

The discussion of how the sample was compiled, drawing on several different published listings, is careful, and anyone who has attempted comparable work will immediately recognise and empathize with the difficulties. I am one of those, and Fleck very kindly sent me a complete copy of his list to help me find data on the authors of books in the International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction (first edited by Karl Mannheim). That enabled me to fill in the characteristics of some of those authors – but it also drew to my attention that some authors on my list who fitted his conception of the generation he studied were not included on his list. The reason for that was simple: their names happened not to be in the sources he had used. He was aware [see p. 119] that such individuals existed but, since their identification was accidental, chose, in the interests of consistency, not to include them. (Note that this is different from the justification of the printed sources used cited above, since to add the accidental extras would have broadened the sample further). Another researcher might have chosen differently between consistency and completeness. *Either* decision would have been a reasonable one – and also one that might have introduced some distortions into the representativeness of the sample used, which would not have been the same in both cases.

There are some interesting points raised about authorial perspective. Fleck makes some robust and overt value judgments on particular sociological work in passing, without stopping to justify them. This is in refreshing, and sometimes startling, contrast to what can be the almost hypocritical concealment of personal tastes which is more conventional. The assumption seems to be made of what is in effect a Lazarsfeldian survey-based general perspective on what is important, convincing, technically correct in methods, even though important limitations of that are mentioned. As it happens I share this perspective, but even despite that this makes me intellectually uneasy. I would not hesitate over the matter if the position was made more explicit and justified or, alternatively, treated more relativistically: if one takes this position, then it follows that... But is Fleck not right that the likely readers can fill those in for themselves? Perhaps the fact that I do not come from the German-

speaking intellectual community makes more formal politeness to its members seem correct, while a member of the family can speak less formally? But if an American had said some of the things Fleck says, he might have risked being treated by some European readers as almost racist.

The question of what can be taken for granted about the reader also arises in other ways, and it is evident that this is especially likely to be salient in a translated work, originally written for a different audience, though it can be just as relevant where there is not a language difference but some cultural/intellectual cleavage, as demonstrated even between English-language works produced in Canada and the USA. Some of the sensitivities about the characterization of German-language sociology during the Nazi period are hardly felt by non-members of the German-language community. That difference is not hard to identify, but I suspect that there are others which precisely my background which creates them makes it harder to detect. It is not stated that the content of the book was revised or augmented for the English-language version, and Fleck is obviously sufficiently cosmopolitan not to have had a narrowly Germanic perspective, so maybe the question did not arise. I am happy to credit him with a book that can be read with great profit in at least two different languages.

There are few other substantial works on the history of sociology that make appropriate use of relatively sophisticated quantitative approaches where those are applicable, without succumbing to the temptation of attending to the method in itself rather than to the conclusions that it makes it plausible to reach.<sup>1</sup> It is also impressive in its archival range, and in the use made of appropriate official statistics on such topics as the characteristics of the relevant labour markets. It is one of the few works that employs a variety of methods, and discusses method and its consequences for conclusions seriously. That these comments are somewhat methodological in character thus reflects the book's strengths. It is a model for those working in this field of how to put together a body of hard-won data of different kinds to build a convincing total picture.

## References

Fleck, C.

2011 *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>1</sup> I confess, however, that I found the modes of visual presentation of some of the tables and figures less helpful than they were intended to be.

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Abstract: A theoretical and methodological review of Christian Fleck's book, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research*.

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Keywords: *Archival sources for sampling, Frankfurt School, German-speaking emigrants, Nazism, prosopography.*

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**Jennifer Platt** is emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Sussex. Her publications include *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America, 1920-1960* (1996); "Sociology" in R.E. Backhouse and P. Fontaine (eds.), *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945* (2010).