

**BOOK REVIEW**

Backhouse & Fontaine (eds.): A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences

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Backhouse, Roger E., and Philippe Fontaine, eds., *A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences*
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Four years after *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945* (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010), British historian of economics Roger Backhouse and his French colleague Philippe Fontaine follow up with another edited volume titled *A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences*. While the first volume provided a substantial overview of the various interrelations between the different social science disciplines, the volume under review pursues a methodological agenda towards a comparative interdisciplinary history of the social sciences. The editors' central claim is that the histories of the social sciences have been written primarily by disciplinary experts for their disciplinary peers. Therefore these histories were oriented toward their respective disciplinary scholarly standards rather than historiographical ones. In order to allow for a literature that captures the social sciences after World War II as a single historical phenomenon, the editors argue, one needs to arrive at a better understanding of the various historiographical traditions within the disciplines.

The seven essays comprise an introduction by the editors followed by disciplinary chapters on the historiography of history (Kevin Passmore), anthropology (Henrika Kuklick), sociology (Charles Camic), psychology (James H. Capshew), economics (Roger Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine), and political science (Robert Adcock). All of the chapters are written by eminent historians of their fields and prove useful for the general reader insofar as they provide orientation with more (e.g. Adcock) or less (Passmore) concise expositions of the most important disciplinary histories since 1945 (and some of them before). What unites the chapters is their concern with basic historiographical debates of the history of science, like internalism vs. externalism or presentism vs. historicism, as well as various analytical approaches from biography to immanent theory discussion to institutional analyses. More innovative aspects concern other commonalities such as the apparently similar chronological dynamics of the emerging specialty of disciplinary histories that took place roughly around 1970, at least partially as a consequence of the massive institutional growth during the 1950s and 60s. In addition, the chapters show a variety of functions that historians of disciplines exerted

within those disciplines, ranging from legitimizing poorly recognized fields to theoretical reflection, open criticism and, finally, self-contained historical scholarship. Among the disciplines covered, it is the historians of economics and historians of psychology who have most clearly departed from their core disciplines and established relatively independent subfields with more or less distinct intellectual traditions. Historians of economics have been very close to intellectual history and were often related to “heterodox” economic thought. Historians of psychology have, among other things, prominently endorsed critical histories investigating power relations as well as the impact of psychological discourse on public life more generally. In contrast to these, historians of sociology have remained significantly closer to the discipline’s core theoretical debates, as Camic’s article aptly demonstrates.

Insights like these will make the book interesting to anyone who shares the authors concerns about a common history of the social sciences. By pointing to the surfeit of internally oriented histories of the social science disciplines the editors have, in my view, identified an important obstacle to such integrative literature. However, although some of the chapters (above all Kuklick, Camic, and Adcock) are individually interesting, the book as a whole leaves the reader a bit unsatisfied for several reasons. For one, it is almost exclusively concerned with the Anglo-Saxon world (mainly the USA). Germany and France receive occasional and cursory mention; with the rest of the world entirely ignored. More importantly, the authors seem to struggle with the somewhat confusing task of writing the history of how the history of their disciplines has been written. Passmore’s overloaded recital of alleged turns in historical scholarship is the most telling example. Only the analyses by Camic and Adcock succeed in analytically distinguishing the history of disciplines from the disciplines own historiography. But most importantly, the whole project of historiographical meta-reflection as it finds itself reflected in the volume is, in my view, not very useful in light of the objective to work “toward a comparative interdisciplinary historiography” (p.16), mainly because it implies virtually no comparisons. Instead the book delivers insights into the (micro-) histories of historians of disciplines. Judging from the chapters, the different historiographies appear to be characterized by similar pressures; that a reflexive subfield, to which the historians are exposed, is revealed within any discipline. Since neither these historiographical issues, nor any substantial issues are explicitly compared or theorized anywhere, it remains unclear in what ways this exercise enhances comparative historiography of the social sciences after 1945.

A simpler and better answer to the problem of comparative historiography of the social sciences would have been to actually compare the disciplines or, at least, to reflect upon the possibilities of doing so. One can only speculate why this most obvious concern receives little attention in this volume. Reading the introduction, which includes some discussion of previous comparative history of the social sciences, one gets the impression that this might be a result of the editors’ methodological preference for a history of ideas approach together with an apparent bias against social science history. In several footnotes (sic!), sociologically-minded works are characterized as having a “narrow conception of human agency”, employing “accounts [...] geared toward defending the progress of scientific reason” (p. 9), or viewing “history as the mere instrument of a reflexive science.” (p. 9) Not only do these allusions seem inappropriate in light of the interdisciplinary sermons upon which this book is based, they are also programmatically ill-conceived. The field of comparative history and historical sociology is an area where boundaries between history and social science are at their most permeable and, as a consequence, it offers the best methodological tools for the issues Backhouse and Fontaine are addressing. In disregarding this tradition and insinuating the existence of a general opposition between history and the social sciences, it is unfortunate that the editors miss this important point.