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# Reframing the History of the Competition Concept: Neoliberalism, Meritocracy, Modernity

Jonathan Hearn

## Abstract

This paper reframes the concept of competition, arguing that recent tendencies to frame it in the context of neoliberalism are too narrow to grasp its full significance. We need to see how it operates well beyond the capitalist economy, as a social and not just theoretical concept. I contextualise it in a deeper history, going back to the eighteenth century, beginning with an empirical examination of the development of the concept in English language dictionaries and encyclopaedias, using a method of ‘conceptual history’. I show how the concept, its grammatical forms, and characteristic associations have evolved substantially since the eighteenth century. This finding is placed in a broader explanatory context, arguing that it is the combined rise of a set of core institutions of modernity, not just capitalism but also democracy, adversarial law, science, and civil society, that deeply embeds competition in the modern world. The decline of aristocratic and religious authority, and the national subordination of martial power, opened the way for more ‘liberal’ forms of society in which authority is routinely contested through competition, across economy, politics, culture and beliefs. Appreciating this is a necessary step towards truly grappling with the effects of competition on modern life.

Current discussions of the role of competition in modern life have a strong tendency to frame the question in terms of the rise of neoliberalism. Particularly influential here has been Foucault’s lectures published as *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), which claimed that the shift from liberal to neoliberal economics entailed a shift from “exchange” to “competition” as the key organising concept of economic theory. In a recent article Nicholas Gane (2019) challenges Foucault’s thesis, while nonetheless reinforcing the same tendency to situate the concept of competition within a genealogy, admittedly more nuanced than Foucault’s, of neoliberal economic thought. In contrast, I argue that to understand the role of competition in our lives today, we need to make three further moves. First, we need to recognize that competition is not an exclusively economic concept. Such narrowness fails to grasp its full

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significance for modern society. Second, we need to consider concepts, in this case competition, in a wider frame than the rather rarefied discussions of economic and social theorists. Whatever influence these might have, particularly on elites and their strategies of domination, it is the operation of more vernacular, everyday concepts that provide better clues to the overall trends and transformations of society. My primary interest is in competition as a social rather than a theoretical concept. And finally, to understand how the general concept of competition is transformed and 'captured' by economics, we need a somewhat deeper history, that takes in the *status quo ante*. Doing these three things puts the history of the concept in a significantly different light.

Competition is also central to the idea of "meritocracy," and its critique. Michael Young originally popularized the term through his sociological satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033* (1958), in which he speculated about the social and political tensions that would be generated by a future form of a society stratified by "equality of opportunity" (merit) rather than heredity. The satire has been lost on many, and the term now circulates as a positive concept of the good society. Recently academics have returned to the critical version of the concept, very much in the wider frame of criticism of neoliberalism (e.g. Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2020; Sandel, 2020). I share the interest of these authors in "merit" as a popular myth legitimating social order, not just a brand of economic theory. However, I think there are analytic advantages to focusing more specifically on competition as an evolving concept and institution, because this better reveals the social structures that lie beneath the ideology.

In this article I begin by engaging with Gane's article, as an exemplar of the general theoretical tendency I have identified, noting its valuable contributions. I then provide a synoptic history of the development of the vernacular concept of competition in English from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, drawing especially on historical dictionaries and encyclopaedias. In the rest of the article I situate trends in the development of the concept of competition in a wider context of fundamental transformations in the social organization of power, authority and legitimacy, from the personalistic patronage of declining aristocratic society, to the institutionalized rivalry of rising, pluralist democratic society. Over this period competition becomes part of a manifold common sense about the nature of fairness and "who deserves what." My aim is to convince the reader that while competition is certainly a key part of neoliberalism and visions of a meritocratic society, we need to understand that it is fundamental to the social structures of modernity itself, with a history that maps onto the emergence of modernity. While by no means a laudatory account of competition, we will find that it is more integral to modern society than many contemporary critiques allow.

## IN THE SHADOW OF NEOLIBERALISM

Competition gets addressed in critical academic discourse primarily in the frame of explaining the nature and rise of neoliberalism, with its celebration of the improving powers of competition when applied to economics, but also to allocation problems throughout society such as education, health care, and the activities of the state in general (Centeno and Cohen 2012; C. Crouch 2011; Harvey, 2005; Mann, 2013, pp. 129–178). A great deal of this literature focuses especially on the historical emergence of a neoliberal tradition of thought from the Freiburg School of the 1930s and the Mont Pèlerin Society established in 1947, down to the Chicago School of economics (Jones, 2012; Mirowski & Plehwe 2009; Peck, 2010). This literature in turn dovetails with a more purely theoretical-critical trend of social analysis (Brown, 2015; Davies, 2017; Gane, 2014) that takes its cue, not uncritically, from Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008). Foucault argued that there had been an epistemic shift in economic thought from an original "liberal" economics, represented by Adam Smith, in which markets were modelled on the image of "exchange," to a now regnant "neoliberal" economics, tracing back to ordoliberalism in the 1930s, in which "competition" was now the guiding image of how the market should operate, and selfhood redefined as an entrepreneurial project.

Nicholas Gane's recent article "Competition: A Critical History of a Concept" (2019) exemplifies this last trend. It provides a short intellectual history of the concept of competition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century,

but one which nonetheless leads us to the development of neoliberalism in the guise of economic theory. Gane's aim is to question and build on Foucault's account. He shows that the idea of competition was quite alive in the "pre-neoliberal" era of the early nineteenth century, negatively in critiques of the brutal effects of the market, articulated by figures such as the progressive and paternalist industrialist Robert Owen, and positively, as a modernising force, in the work of John Stuart Mill. He also shows us how the concept gets pushed beyond the narrow bounds of economic theory by early sociologists such as Spencer, Weber, and Simmel for whom it was a broader sociological principle. Spencer in particular registers the new influence of Darwin's evolutionary ideas, relating these to notions of universal progress, while Simmel sees competition as a basic principle of social interaction. Gane then goes on to examine the main strains of neoliberal thought "proper," looking at key figures in the German and American national traditions, but also at the Austrian school of Mises and Hayek, neglected by Foucault.

Gane uses this deeper history of the concept, only traced here, to interrogate Foucault's exchange-to-competition schema. By expanding the range of theorists in the genealogy of neoliberalism Gane shows that Foucault's schema does not hold up. For instance, the German ordoliberal figure Wilhelm Röpke's concern with "the moral and social foundations of market society" (2019: 49) that lie beyond the market itself, contradicts Foucault's claim that in neoliberal thought the market extends to encompass all of society. Similarly, Gane shows that Foucault's neglect of the American economist Frank Knight misses the latter's neo-Kantian attempts to understand market society not as naturalized, but as an active moral choice. Altogether Gane reveals a much more nuanced field and evolution of ideas.

However, there is still something unsatisfying about this approach. It enriches the history of ideas, but if this is to be taken as a guide to understanding why we live in a competition saturated society, surely it is too idealist a history. These fine distinctions in the use of the concept of competition by a narrow segment of intellectuals must correspond to wider social trends, but do they lead, follow, or simply run in parallel along their own special track? Surely to understand the role that competition plays, we need to examine how the concept evolved more in the vernacular, and less in high flown theory. Moreover, if we only look at economic theory, we will tend to reproduce a kind of economic determinism, albeit one constructed within the confines of discourse. Can the rise of competition as a governing idea be narrowly located in the rise of capitalism and its theorization, rather than in wider patterns of societal transformation?

To be clear, my objection holds for Foucault in the first instance, and Gane secondarily. It is not that either one denies that competition takes place beyond the market economy, but I don't think they pay adequate attention to the fact that it does, which narrows their treatments of the concept of competition. My aim is not to refute their accounts, although I agree with Gane's corrections of Foucault, but rather to expand our purview of investigation. I attend to the history of the concept in the next section, but after that I seek a more structural and causal account, in which the transformation of competition reflects basic changes in the actual workings of social power, and how its distributions are rendered authoritative and legitimate.

## A SYNOPTIC HISTORY OF THE COMPETITION CONCEPT

My interest is in how the everyday concept of competition has evolved over the last three centuries. The approach I have taken to this question draws on a method developed in the field of *Begriffsgeschichte* or 'conceptual history' (Koselleck 1985; Richter, 1986). Leading figure Reinhard Koselleck was in fact influenced by Foucault's notion of genealogy, and similarly concerned with the transformation of thought in the modern period and the role of concepts in shaping history, and how history itself is conceptualised (1989). However, his methodological approach was different. I have used a key method of *Begriffsgeschichte*, by beginning with entries for the word/concept in question, in a sample set of thirty English language (UK and US) dictionaries running from 1678 to 1893, and twenty-nine encyclopaedias running from 1771 to 1996 (see Appendix). I have consulted a range of publications by

various authors/compiler, selected at relatively even intervals across the period in question. This is supplemented by surveying diverse historical ephemera (pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers and magazine articles) available through on-line databases, and general reading in history, to add context. If there has been significant change in the popular meaning of competition over the period in question, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, being concerned with definitions and prevalent usage, provide a good way of investigating that thesis.

"Conceptual history" is concerned with the shifting fit between key concepts and surrounding political, economic and social transformations, in short, with the emergence of modern socio-political thought. Koselleck refers to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the *Sattelzeit*, or "saddle-period" in which a whole raft of concepts change rapidly and take on specifically modern meanings in response to the changes of the period (see Brunner et al., 1972-1989). I also find the "saddle-period" to be crucial for the changing meaning and use of the concept of competition, which I study in the Anglophone context. I begin in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries precisely to give a baseline from which changes and elaborations in use of the word competition takes off. I limit myself to English data for reasons of focus, but I also will argue the anglophone world was in the vanguard of popular conceptual change in this case. One might object that conceptual history in this etymological form is just as 'idealist' as the more intellectualist history of theories that I am questioning. But I think that there is an important difference. The patterns thrown up by actual everyday language traced in these sources are quite different from the history of theoretical ideas. They provide evidence of a largely unintended process that tracks wider institutional changes, and is less determined by the vagaries of intellectual debates and careers.

This method is not without limitations. Early dictionaries, before the rise of modern philology, were often as prescriptive as descriptive in their purposes, but this is more a matter of grammar and spelling than semantics, which is harder to prescribe. One becomes aware that a certain amount of "cribbing" went on between dictionaries in the earlier days, problematising treating them as separate "cases." Nonetheless, even such cribbing in some sense affirms that the definitions copied did correspond to usage. Finally, once established, specific dictionaries may have been conservative, reproducing entries from previous editions, and perhaps not keeping up with everyday usage. Samuel Johnson's influential dictionary (1818), frequently drawn upon by others, in particular sought to establish literary norms, and relied heavily on "classic" quotes (Shakespeare, Dryden, etc.) from previous centuries. It is very likely that trends in everyday usage were ahead of what was being codified in dictionaries, so it is sensible to assume a degree of lag in their representation of normal usage. But whatever the lag, we can be confident that the overall trends indicated are there. As long as we treat these sources as guiding indicators of changes in predominant usage, not final authorities, they can serve our general purpose here.

Remarkably comprehensive for the time, one of the earliest English dictionaries, Philip Edward's *The New World of Words. Or General English Dictionary* (1678) contains only: "*Competitour*, (Lat.) a Rival, one that seeks after the same thing that another sues for." *An English Expositour* (1680) offers these definitions: "*Competition*. Strife, or a contending with another for the self-same thing. *Competitor*. A rival or one that stands in competition with another about any thing, he that sueth for the same thing with another." And *Cocker's English Dictionary* (1704) offers the somewhat more succinct: "*Competition*, *contending for one and the same thing*. *Competitour*, a *Rival that sues for the same thing*."

As these early definitions indicate, the word in this period described any rivalry around some limited good. The emphasis is on conflict ("strife") and contending claims ("sues for"), but there is no sense of competition as a general principle in society, as a form of organized practice, or as something especially associated with economic activity. The word does get used in regard to economic relations, but it is just as likely to be used to refer to suitors contending for the affection of a beloved, or rivals for kingly favour, or more abstractly, contests between supernatural beings for our souls, or between "passions" and "interests" to guide our actions. These basic definitions remain very stable, with only minor variation, throughout the eighteenth century. But by the end of the eighteenth century one begins to sense the word being stretched to new purposes.

Some cognate words provide further context. From *An Universal Etymological Dictionary* of 1721, we see, not surprisingly, that "rival" and "rivalry" are treated as near synonyms for "competitor" and "competition," respectively.

The words “contest,” “to contest” and “contestation” denote controversy, dispute, quarrelling, “striving with or against,” but lack the meaning of formally organized confrontation. Similarly, variants of “game” and “sport” are defined fairly loosely in terms of play, diversion, and pastime.

Worth more attention for the present argument, from the same dictionary, is: “EMULATION, a striving to excel or go beyond another, in any thing; also envying or disdain.” Later the 1790-98 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* expands somewhat floridly:

EMULATION, a generous ardour kindled by the praise-worthy examples of others, which impels us to imitate, to rival, and if possible, to excel them. This passion involves in it esteem of the person whose attainments or conduct we emulate, of the qualities and actions in which we emulate him, and a desire of resemblance, together with a joy springing from the hope of success ...

Plato observes of emulation, that it is the daughter of envy; if so, there is a great difference between the mother and the offspring; the one is a virtue and the other a vice. Emulation admires great actions, and strives to imitate them; envy refuses the praises that are their due; emulation is generous, and only thinks of surpassing a rival; envy is low, and only seeks to lessen him. Perhaps, therefore, it would be more just to suppose emulation the daughter of admiration; admiration, however, is a principal ingredient in the composition of it.

This idea of emulation had great currency in France in the late eighteenth century, and like many ideas of the time, this currency was shared among French and British intellectuals, despite political and economic tensions between the two countries. As shown, dictionary definitions from the first half of the eighteenth century are more ambivalent, emphasising both the desire to excel another, and an attitude of envy and disdain. But by the end of the century emulation was seen as a key virtue driving artistic and academic pursuits (Crow, 2006), that could be stimulated through official prize contests (Staum, 1985), but also generalized as a principle of social improvement, and eventually an ideal for the citizens of the new French republic (Kaplan, 2003). Although we still use the term emulation today in the same basic sense, the quasi-philosophical context and association with virtue and excellence in a practice has largely migrated to the terms competition, compete, and competitive. To describe someone or something as “competitive,” in any field of activity, can be seen as a compliment, and an ethos of competition as one that brings excellence. It appears that emulation occupied a similar normative conceptual space during the Enlightenment, before being relatively eclipsed by expansion of the concept of competition in the nineteenth century.

Returning to competition, by the nineteenth century dictionaries are indicating an elaboration of word-forms and uses, including the verb infinitive “to compete,” “competitive” as a descriptive adjective, and “competition” as a count noun, i.e. as the name of a kind of event. The word “compete” can be found as far back as 1620, used in a sense of evaluative comparison (“There is nothing admitted to compete with him...”), the more modern sense of agents competing over a specific object only coming in at the very end of the eighteenth century. The earliest dictionary entry I have found for “compete,” suggesting it has come into more general usage, is in *Webster’s Dictionary* of 1832:

COMPETE ... 1. To seek or strive for the same thing as another; to carry on a competition or rivalry [example:] Our manufacturers *compete* with the English in making cotton cloths. 2. To strive or claim to be equal ....

Out of “competition” as a situation, a clearer idea of “competing,” as something one does, is emerging. Webster sought to codify American English, so the early inclusion of “compete” here may indicate a degree of difference between common British and American usage at the time. However, the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana* of 1845, published in London, includes an entry for “compete” and remarks that: “To compete is, now, not uncommon in speech.” This suggests it was coming into currency in that period.

Similarly the word “competitive” makes its appearance only in the mid-nineteenth century, as in this example of usage from 1834 in Harriet Martineau’s *Moral Many Fables*: “Whether those returns are appropriated by individuals under the competitive system, or equally distributed among the members of a co-operative community’ (see entry “competitive, adj” in *Oxford English Dictionary* online, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)). In these last two examples economic discussions are the context. Another prominent one at the time was the development of competitive examinations for

appointment to the civil service, the merits of which were a subject of considerable public discussion from mid-century. By the late nineteenth century all three variants—competition, compete, competitive—are routinely appearing in dictionaries, such as Ogilvie's *Imperial English Dictionary* of 1882. It is also noticeable that by this time the separate sense of competition as a deliberately organized event, while not new, is beginning to work its way into dictionary definitions, as when Ogilvie offers: "2. A trial of skill proposed as a test of superiority or comparative fitness; as, the prize was decided by written *competition*; the *competitions* for appointment in the civil service." Competition is becoming less a matter of raw confrontation, and more a means of determining merit.

Across the nineteenth century as political economy evolves towards more mathematicized modern economics, and becomes a more general influence on public discourse, the strong association we have today between competition and economics crystallizes. In the third volume of the new *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* (1862) the morally freighted entry on "competition" offers:

Its most apt exemplification is a race, where all are going to the same point, and all strive to be first there, while though only one can achieve this objective, some others will have the satisfaction of being nearer to success than the competitors behind them. The most important practical use of the word C. is in the political economy of commerce, where it is the great motive-power of production and enterprise.

Here "competition" is absorbing the connotations of "emulation." By the later nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, as already suggested in the Ogilvie example above, Darwin's theory of evolution, elaborated by figures such as Herbert Spencer (see Gane, 2019, pp. 39–41) is combining with economic discourse to shape a synthetic conception. The earliest example in my sample of the explicit influence of a Darwinian conception of competition is in the 1903 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This contains no entry for "competition," but its article on "economics" interestingly downplays the dichotomy between a pre-industrial past dominated by trade monopolies and a new free market economy based on competition:

Competition, in the sense in which the word is still used in many economic works, is merely a special case of the struggle for survival, and, from its limitation, does not go far towards explaining the actual working of modern institutions. To buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest; to secure cheapness by lowering the expenses of production; to adopt the less expensive rather than the more expensive method of obtaining a given result—these and other maxims are as old as human society. Competition, in the Darwinian sense, is characteristic not only of modern industrial states, but of all living organisms; and in the narrower sense of "higgling the market" is found on the Stock Exchange, in the markets of old country towns, in mediaeval fairs and Oriental Bazaars.

In sum, competition is seen as a general principle of social life and human history, and economic competition better understood as a special case. Similarly, the revised entry on "competition" in the 1936 edition of *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* has added: "In political economy it is simply the form taken by the struggle for existence as applied to industry." Exemplary of the fusion of economic and ecological senses of competition by the early twentieth century is the extensive article in the 1930–35 *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, written by Walton H. Hamilton, a leading figure in the legal realism and institutional economics of the time. It begins:

COMPETITION is a term in social theory which associates the fact of a struggle with the function of order. It is the key word in an account, real, abstract or fictitious, of how rivalry for prestige and income, for power and wealth, comes to promote organization. It is by competition—whether of persons, firms, industries, nations, races, beliefs, habits or cultures—that the fittest survive; individuals, instruments and institutions of different capacities are given places in a going society; and an industrial system, whose personnel passes, materials decay and arrangements change is adapted to new conditions. Competition is at once a process of selection, an economic organization and an agency of social development.

Some of this language, especially the idea of races in competition, is troubling. Nonetheless the tenor of Hamilton's wider argument is not social Darwinist, but rather towards a grand synthesis of economic and Darwinian thought in a kind of historical institutionalism. The article asserts the irreducible nature of competition, as rivalry, highlighting the tension between the ideal abstractions of dominant economic theory and the complexity of competition in real life. There is a strong sense of rethinking the idea of competition in the context of Depression-

era uncertainty about the future of capitalism. It is part of the same transnational milieu of economic thought that was leading toward “ordoliberal” ideas in Freiburg, and Hayek’s quasi-evolutionary concept of competition in economic and wider social life (1960, pp. 22–38).

The basic definition of competition from the eighteenth century has been relatively constant to today. It is the idea of rivalry to obtain some limited good, or a struggle for supremacy in some confrontation. In the eighteenth century and earlier, the term generally identified any incidentally arising situation of rivalry, but with the elaborations of the nineteenth century it increasingly identifies not just the *situation*, but also the *means* of resolving that rivalry. This is the significance of competition coming to also mean an organized event, a contest. I suggest that a world where competition comes to mean not just a situation arising, but a clear set of cultural conventions for allocating rewards, is one where the action, “to compete” and the disposition, to be “competitive,” will also become much more salient. As for our association of competition with the capitalist economy, a growing association can be found from the late eighteenth century, consolidating across the nineteenth century, and blending with Darwinian evolutionary thought. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we are beginning to see the crystallization of our current concept, in which economics and ecology are primary contexts associated with specialized “scientific” meanings, sometimes brought together in grand synthesis, but often just allowed to develop along separate tracks. But we should remember that in everyday usage competition has many other contexts: social prestige, sports, entertainment, arts and sciences, politics, international relations, and so on. Competition is, as it was in 1700, a highly general concept. We should not automatically attribute competition in these various spheres to the effects of the economy. Instead, we should ask what wider social transformations might have caused it to become so elaborated, and so relevant to so many aspects of our lives.

## THE WIDER CONTEXT—CHANGING POWER, AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY

Although the rest of my argument has implications for how we understand the formation of modernity, it is not my intention here either to provide a theory of modernity, or to invoke specific theories of modernity. Further theorization would require a larger canvass.<sup>1</sup> The rest of this article simply places the preceding etymological account in an interpretive context. Nonetheless, like all arguments, mine begins with certain assumptions that precede and make it possible. Most basic is what I call the “perennial power problem.” Sets of social relations, once they reach a certain scale and complexity, entail problems about how power is distributed, and how its allocation is justified. When there are fundamental changes in how these relations are organized, new questions about how power is allocated and legitimated arise. This happens within relatively small organizations as they grow in scale. This also happens on grander scales, when many interdigitating societies and their states go through such a transition together, as happened in Europe and its colonies across a long eighteenth century and the “*Sattelzeit*.” This period involved a ramifying reconfiguration of power and its legitimation running across all aspects of society—military, political, economic, and cultural—and not just as a series of effects of the rise of capitalism. The extension of markets and the rise of modern capitalism is of course a key context for the institutionalization of competition, but the elaboration of competition must be understood in this wider context of the reconfiguration of social power relations throughout society, that cannot be adequately contained within the realm of the economy.

Specifically in Europe and its colonies, we can see the growing scale, complexity and pressures in several interacting dimensions. Despite the dip of the Black Death, population in Western Europe roughly trebled between 1000 and 1700 (from c.25 million to c.81 million). As trading cities grew the division of labour and class structures ramified. Peasants and serfs were joined by wage labourers, craftspeople, journeymen, and urban craft and merchant classes generated much larger and more powerful merchants who vied with nobilities for power and influence over the monarch, the court and the state. Connected with urban development, Protestantism developed, contending with the Catholic Church while itself diverging into various sects and churches. The European practice of war among dynastic states generated much larger and more expensive standing armies, aligned with expanding



state bureaucracies. Meanwhile, the competitive search for mercantile wealth in Asia and the Americas generated large sea-going empires, and colonial projects, whose inter-imperial competitions led to global wars. The Seven Years War (1756-1763) led to huge national debts for the contending European hegemonies of Britain and France, ultimately triggering the American and French Revolutions, creating prototypes of the modern nation state. Aspects of this sketch will be elaborated below. The point is that this was not just a period of growth, expansion and conquest; it was one of traditional European structures of political and moral order being stretched to a breaking point.

The great shift in power relations associated with the rise of modernity was a shift from rule through aristocracies and their patronage networks, to one of rule through democracies and associated institutions of state bureaucracy and civil society. This was a shift from the allocation of power and rewards through favour, down a hierarchy, to their allocation through institutionalized rivalry in competition among notional equals. The story of this transition is one of the aristocratic patronage system reaching the limits of its capacity to manage power relations in society, and being replaced, ad hoc, by a new system that we variously associate with popular rule, commerce and capitalism, liberalism and democracy, science and secularism. Of course, such transitions are never absolute: aristocracies trail on, and plenty of patronage continues to operate throughout societies, because hierarchies, though changed, persist. But the point is, in terms of public legitimacy, such patronage is now tinged with corruption, and the idea of fairness in the distribution of power and opportunity is now wedded to equal opportunities to compete, to win on merit.

In keeping with a long-term concept of competition, it is not the case that aristocratic society was without competition, but rather that competition was not nearly as formalized as it is today. Aristocratic society saw fierce competition among its elites, for thrones and royal favour, usually expressed violently, through murderous palace intrigue, or outright rebellion and war. In Europe, one of the prototypes of more modern and formalized competition was the medieval tournament (D. Crouch 2005). But this underscores our point. These events were proving grounds of martial readiness, as well as arenas of intra-elite display and rivalry. They implied a class of people whose power over others was based on their readiness to go to war, and tournaments had a propensity to break out into actual unscripted violence for that very reason.

Images of the replacement of feudalism by capitalism, of the bourgeoisie displacing aristocracies, are too crude. For our question, it is more illuminating to trace the changing role of aristocracies from the medieval to the modern period, as an indicator of how the “power problem” was transforming. There was no single “crisis of the aristocracy” (Stone, 1965) but rather a long history of “retooling” nobilities to serve new functions (Asch, 2003; Dewald, 1996). With the rise of absolutist monarchs and bureaucratic states came both the internal pacification of former feudal nobilities, as their power to rebel was suppressed or bought off, and their further incorporation into bureaucratic states. Historians of this period speak of the “military revolution” (Rodgers 1995), the set of interacting innovations in military technologies (gunpowder, cannon, fortifications, etc.) and organization (drilling, command structures, etc.). As aristocrats were internally pacified, many were also incorporated into a new professional caste, specialising in scientific techniques of warfare being taught in new military academies springing up in this period (Storrs & Scott, 1996). Some strands of the nobility went into new “civil service” careers in state bureaucracies (*noblesse de robe*), and some sank into obscurity, but the association of aristocratic classes with leadership of the modernized militaries of nation states would persist at least until the First World War. And the wars they served in were at once European interstate wars, and also inter-imperial wars as European powers moved outwards in competitive conquest. For the present argument, the point is that this subordination of violent competition and the class that had monopolized its conduct to the interests of the state, set the stage for the elaboration of competition in other spheres of life. Our highly institutionalized and elaborated forms of competition were made possible by this basic shift.

At the same time, “retooling” nobilities were increasingly intermarrying and cooperating with rising merchant classes. And the latter would eventually become key carriers of the new ideology of competition embedded in modern “free market” economics, that so shapes our debates to this day. But before that could happen, this class too required some “pacification.” The dominant political economic ideology of the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries, especially in Britain, was mercantilism. And the “big guns” of the merchant class were the royally chartered companies, equipped to operate as militarized quasi-states in fierce competition with other European states and their companies (Phillips & Sharman, 2020). The concept of competition pervades Sir James Steuart’s quasi-mercantilist book *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767) but predominantly in the context of mercantile competition between “nations” (i.e. states), as evidenced in chapter titles such as (from Book II): “Chap XII. Of the competition between nations,” and “Chap. XIII. How far the form of government of a particular country may be favourable or unfavourable to a competition with other nations, in matters of commerce.” In the late eighteenth century, geopolitical and inter-imperial rivalry, as much as markets per se, was the context for thinking about competition.

Although he never cites him, Steuart was one of the people Adam Smith was arguing against in *Wealth of Nations* (1981[1776]). Today we often assume our association of competition with economics has a particular origin in Smith’s work. However closer inspection suggests that Smith’s contribution here was less than we imagine (Hearn, 2018). The concept of competition figures prominently in several passages in the *Wealth of Nations*, particularly in regard to ill-effects of restrictions on trade promoted by powerful merchants manipulating the economic policies of sovereigns. But, as Gane observes, overall it operates in a secondary and descriptive way, not as a central organising concept. In fact, the work can be seen as an argument against the idea that relations between sovereign states involved in commerce should be conceived along competitive lines, according to mercantilist theories. Smith can be understood as making a case against this kind of competition, against “jealousy of trade” (see Hont, 2005), and instead promoting international cooperation on the basis of what would eventually be called “comparative advantage.” Smith’s ideas did not win the day immediately on publication. Many of his critics could not entertain his argument about abandoning imperialism and putting faith in international markets, which seemed too unrealistic in a world of inter-imperial rivalry. While widely read and respected, it was only later in nineteenth century Britain, as free trade liberalism became hegemonic and the corn laws were repealed, that he began to be portrayed as an apical ancestor of a new economic science. And this was also another stage in the movement of power from the landed aristocratic class to the bourgeoisie, both now more fully pacified.

Meanwhile, the idea of democracy had arrived fully on the scene (Dunn, 2005). In the eighteenth century the term often carried connotations of mob-rule, but with the American and French Revolutions and their challenge to the *ancienne regime* it became an ideology with an increasing claim on the minds of national populations. Aristocrats, mercantilists and liberals had largely been sceptical about democracy, but by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (the *Sattelzeit*), the aristocratic order was weakened. Rule by favour and patronage was increasingly suspect. But if the time-honoured inherited right to rule was no longer convincing to many, there is still the perennial problem of power—how is its distribution to be justified? If legitimate power now lay in “the people” as a whole, how was it to collectively go about the messy business of allocating power among its members? At times revolutionary ardour seemed to promise an eschatological transformation in which all life’s benefits would be justly distributed, and individual and national wills would be at one. But the reality was that new agrarian and commercial elites rose to power, increasingly dependent for their legitimation on those below. Because of this dilemma, competition was not just reconfigured as an economic idea, part of the shift from martial to commercial society, but at the same time became integral to processes of politics, government and law.

The most apparent way in which this happened was with the rise of political parties and party systems. The prehistory of parties lies in the contests between “Tory” and “Whig” factions in Britain, reflecting tensions between traditional landed aristocracies and urban based merchants more sympathetic to political and religious innovation, and other interests that revolved around these groupings. But these were factions and patronage networks within and around the Parliament, not mass mobilising parties in an electoral contest (Plumb, 1967). The latter emerges specifically in the new United States after establishing its independence. Eighteenth century English-language political discourse was full of declamations against the evils of party factions, and this deeply influenced the early elites of the new United States, who repeatedly denied their intentions of forming political parties, even while doing so. Some, such as David Hume (1985 [1777], pp. 493–501) and especially Edmund Burke (2012 [1770]),

claimed that parties could be tamed and serve a useful purpose in parliamentary politics. James Madison, influenced by Hume, argued in the *Federalist* No. 10 (2001) and later writings for the necessity and manageability of parties, still loosely conceived. The struggles of the first few decades, between Federalists and the Republicans, was between contending commercial and agrarian visions of the new nation and its political and economic constitution. However, these contrary tendencies were not led by formal political organizations, but by elites with different social bases, elites that expected to inherit social and political leadership in the natural course of events. These elites sought the social standing of aristocrats, while also rejecting the institution of formal aristocracy. Elections at this point were seen as affirmations of the public's choice, not as sophisticated mechanisms of political competition. Both groups sought to articulate a commanding vision of the nation that would stand above and obviate the need for parties (Hofstadter, 1969).

It wasn't until the next generation confronted the problems of political succession and routinization, in a political system fundamentally based on popular election and not inheritance, that the idea of parties and a party system became normalized. Martin Van Buren who led the Republican Party in New York State in the 1810s and 1820s (and became the 8th President in 1837) was a prime example of the new politician, and a major advocate of a professionalized party-based politics that used the caucus to strategically coordinate party mobilization across the various states, thereby leading to a more integrated national party system (Van Buren, 1867). He espoused an ethos of gentlemanly respect across party lines, unlike the rancour that often characterized the previous generation, and solidarity and compromise within parties, to assure their political efficacy. In time this model spread, with democracy, across Europe (Caramani 2003, 2004) and beyond, but the US was the epicentre of this innovation in electorally competitive politics.

However, Cedric de Leon (2010) has shown how the historical process of pacification outlined above can be seen in the background here. It took a few decades for this new model, rather than outright contests of force, to take hold in the popular imagination. In the early days an important part of how this was done was by modelling party activity and discourse on militias. Parties borrowed military terminology: enlistment, brigades, campaigns, and so on, using public drills and parades to show a mass presence on the streets. They styled themselves as mass mobilizations, potentially violent, in defence of a state under threat of corruption and usurpation, and played upon the idea of "regenerative war" as a necessity for vital democracy (as Jefferson once put it, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants"). New generations involved in mass democratic politics had missed the experience of the revolutionary war, but that remained part of the language through which they understood the political process for some time.

Meanwhile, institutionalized competition was developing in two other aspects of the modern state. The first was the rise of adversarial law in the Anglo-American legal tradition. From the seventeenth century in England the practice of assigning legal counsel for the defence of the accused gradually grew to control various abuses. From a system in which all legal counsel was on the side of the monarch and its appointed prosecutors, the idea of a legal contest between prosecutors and defenders gradually codified across the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth century (Hostettler, 2006; Langbein, 2003; May, 2003). This is sometimes characterized as a shift from "judge-made" to "lawyer-made" law, paralleling the classic distinction between "Continental (or Civil, or Roman) Law" and English "Common Law" traditions (Herzog, 2018). In America a related emergence of adversarial law occurred, with a distinctly American "accent." As Amanda Kessler has observed, in the developing legal culture in nineteenth century America, leading lawyers saw themselves as civic republicans dedicated to oratorical skills uniquely displayed in public trials featuring cross-examination before a jury. As she puts it: "This adversarial competition between warring litigants was, in turn, vaunted as vital for preserving and promoting a distinctly American commitment to freedom, encompassing both political liberty and free enterprise" (2017, p. 200). The other aspect, touched on above, was raging controversies about the need to replace older patterns of patronage as the route to office with more justifiable systems of competitive examination. In Britain this change was advanced particularly by the establishment of the Civil Service Commissioners in 1855, as envisioned in the Northcote-Trevelyan report commissioned by Gladstone a few years earlier (cf. Young, 1958, p. 19). The report advocated

that appointment be based on merit according to performance in open competitive examinations. Both these examples show the competitive principle bedding into the structures of law and government in ways that cannot be reduced to economic theory, but have more to do with democratic state legitimacy.

We now turn to the more amorphous arena of culture and ideology. Here my focus is on the shift in how beliefs, and claims to truth, are newly authorized, given the decline in the aristocratic order and centralized religious authority, and the rise of science and public opinion. In short, how do we move from a world where the legitimization of belief is monopolized by a small stratum, to one where it is democratized and thrown into open contention?

Major events unravelling previous distributions of religious authority are well known. Despite internal debates and heretical popular movements from below, throughout the middle ages the universal Catholic Church held a monopoly on the authorization of truth. But with the Reformation and fragmentation into competing sects and national churches that grip was loosened, and after the violent religious conflict of the seventeenth century (the Thirty Years War, the English Civil War) the Peace of Westphalia (1648) established a new more tolerant order between states. In the wake of this century of ideologically driven violence, the eighteenth century, especially in Britain and France, saw variant forms of "The Enlightenment" (Dupré, 2004; Ferrone 2015). This was a period of ideological opening and experimentation between the weakening of the older aristocratic order, but before the reconsolidation of power in modernising imperial nation states in the nineteenth century. The Enlightenment saw elite patronage of the arts and sciences, by aristocrats, and "societies" and "clubs" set up by them and emerging groups of intellectuals (Wuthnow, 1993). Aristocratic patrons sponsored the careers of individual intellectuals, but also sought to cultivate new ideas through the sponsorship of scientific societies and prize competitions for essays and technological innovations (McClellan, 1985; Staum, 1985). This happened in a period in which new freedoms of the press and in public opinion, and a growing literate public, further opened up the space for the articulation of contending beliefs and ideas (Habermas 1989). It was the emergence of what came to be known as "civil society" (Bobbio, 1989; J. A. Hall and Trentmann 2005).

If the "church" was the paradigmatic authoritative institution of the European medieval order, the "university" was the keystone institution of the emerging modern order. Founded in various ways over the centuries—by the Pope, the Church, emperors, monarchs, urban elites—"Universities were an expression of the partnership between church and state characteristic of the *ancien regime*" (Anderson, 2004, p. 8), with a primary role in training for the professions of church, law and medicine. But with the decline of that regime and the rise of enlightenment thought, they diversified their offerings in new fields of sciences and humanities, and were increasingly seen by "enlightened monarchs" as engines of wider societal improvement. Piedmont was an early reformer in the eighteenth century, with the Habsburg Empire following suit by the end of that century. However, the heartland and critical period was the vast numerical expansion in more secular universities in the German lands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which provided a new model and purpose for growing university systems in America and elsewhere (Collins, 1998, pp. 618–687). France and England, the super powers of the day, were more laggard in reform, England being peculiar with its Oxbridge monopoly of the university till the late nineteenth century (although Scotland had four ancient universities).

Universities, as stewards of traditions of arts, humanities and sciences, have moved to the centre as the loci for the production of now largely secular authoritative knowledge. This is not to suggest that universities have the same hold on authoritative truth claims that the medieval Catholic or early Protestant churches had. For one thing, they don't hold the keys to salvation, but more to the point, their authority is really a highly specialized arena for contestation over authoritative knowledge. The authority that modern universities exemplify is the institutionalized and rationalized competition among claims to truth, in highly specialized fields of knowledge, and the practice of science. The medieval Catholic Church monopolized ultimate truth, the Protestant sects and churches broke that monopoly, producing competing religious truths, and finally with the rise of science and secularism the universities inherited that mantle, replacing supernatural with scholarly expertise. They supposedly embody the meritocratic principle in the field of truth claims.

Competition in this arena is fundamentally unlike competition in the other arenas we've discussed. Military competition is forbidden within the jurisdiction of the modern state. Economic competition is constrained by opportunities to mobilize economic resources and make profit. Political competition, to be such, must artificially limit the opportunities for power in the form of offices. Otherwise there would be no stable political structure to control. But with competition over truth and belief, the crucial difference is that there is no effective limit on claim making. Such claims are cheap to produce. To some degree modern universities and the scientific and scholarly communities they generate can dominate such claim making, given their status and resources, but they must operate within a wider field of people and organizations making similar claims through various media.

Let me bring this history of the "great shift" to a close by highlighting two further aspects. First, running through the preceding account is the rise of what James S. Coleman called "corporate actors" (1974, 1993), whose proliferation fundamentally altered social structure (cf. Perrow, 1991). They are broadly what sociologists call "formal organizations." Without invoking Coleman's whole theoretical apparatus, I think his insight is crucial. Corporate actors are legally constituted organizations, endowed with powers of agency, even though they exist and outlive any actual person. Historically they have roots in medieval law processes of incorporation by monarchs and burghs, prime examples being towns, universities, guilds, and trading corporations. The most conspicuous proliferation of these is in the form of the company, the firm set up for economic enterprise. In the early decades of the United States especially, these flourished to meet competing state demands for economic development in terms of canals, turnpikes, urban water systems, and so on (Kaufman, 2008; Wright, 2014). The demand for companies became so great, despite widespread misgivings about their peculiar powers (Maier, 1993; Wright, 2014, pp. 25–48), that within about fifty years they went from being individually created through state legislation, to being self-constituting through simple legal procedures and registration. Limited liability and asset shielding further incentivized investors, and by the mid-nineteenth century, railroad, telegraph and retail companies were forming on much larger and more complex scales (Chandler, 1977; Roy, 1997), a process that continues to this day.

What we need to appreciate is that, while the company is the most obvious form of corporate actor, these in fact have taken other key forms in the transition I have been describing. Political parties as corporate actors are integral to the democratic system, universities provide an institutional frame for contesting truth claims, and civil society is populated not just by companies, but myriad non-profit corporate actors in the form of charities, trusts, and more modest legal associations (P. D. Hall 1992, pp. 13–83, 1996). The conceptual point here is that competition implies competitors, and that while we often experience modern competition as summoning and bearing down upon the individual, it is the growth of this whole new population of artificial agents, of "legal persons," that makes competition central to the allocation of power, in both public and private sectors. It would be a mistake to think that only those corporate actors in the private sector economy compete with one another. To some degree, they all do, and such competition is central to contestations over truth claims and the allocation of formal political power, as much as economic resources.

Secondly, while I have discussed a distinctive public arena of competition over ideas, I have left aside the idea of competition itself as a form of ideology. It indeed operates in this way, but I claim that it is also built into social structures in such a way that we are compelled to live by it, regardless of our belief in it. Nonetheless, we are culturally saturated in the idea, from high theories of biology, psychology, economics and politics, to popular manifestations in sports, games, and television entertainment. It would be hard not to get the messages that competition is fundamental, natural, fair, stimulating, character building, and so on.

However, to return once more to our narrative about the great shift, I think there is mileage (which I can only point to here) in thinking about competition as taking on some of the ideological functions that once belonged to religion. While there are still plenty of religious believers in the world, the medieval church's monopoly of divine authority in Europe is broken, and modern ideology has often sought to reground authority and social order in notions of natural law, and biological nature. The rise of democratic pluralism and its inevitable ideological contention, and the corralling of religious authority into a more privatized realm, leaves a vacuum in terms of a shared public discourse legitimating social and moral order. Looked at in this context, competition exhibits many of

the former functional features of religion, but naturalized and detached from their supernatural moorings. Competition, as a formalized event, has many of the features of ritual (Bell, 1997). It is stylized with a “liturgy” that must be followed, and it has specialist practitioners (judges, referees). Errors here can invalidate the competition/ritual. And it is performative in two important senses: first, it dramatizes basic aspects of social structure and its power relations (Van Gennep, 1960), and second, it “does things with words” (Austin, 1975), participants enter into the ritual as contenders for something, and exit with their statuses transformed, as winners and losers. In his studies of religion, Weber treated the problems of theodicy and soteriology, of why God fails to impose justice on the world, and how to achieve salvation, as enduring existential questions (1978, pp. 518–576). Competition, in its purported naturalism, stripped of divine purpose, provides a kind of cold and brutal answer to these problems. We suffer because we have failed to win life’s competitions, and our hope for salvation lies in winning someday, in this world. Competition appears as a transcendental adjudicator of life’s rewards and punishments, fitted to a secularized world.

## CONCLUSION

I have sought to stretch the frame within which we think about the deep institutionalization of competition in modern society. Rather than a guiding idea formulated by intellectuals and disseminated to wider populations, I suggest we think of it as a social practice built into social structures. Rather than an element specifically of the capitalist economy that then radiates throughout society, I suggest that it is the general reconfiguration of social power, from aristocratic to democratic rule, that calls forth the elaboration of competition. And as a concept and practice, we need to understand that competition is not a neoliberal phenomenon, nor even a modern one, but a perennial of human society which nonetheless is profoundly altered by the modern rise of liberal, capitalist, democratic societies, and their meritocratic justifications. If we want to be able to think critically about it, we need to have a fuller account of why it became so integral to these kinds of societies.

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## APPENDIX

These are lists of the full sample of dictionaries and encyclopedias surveyed for this study, including the ones cited in the article. Key for sources: ECCO = Eighteenth Century Collections Online; EULSC = Edinburgh University Library Special Collections; EUL = Edinburgh University Library standard collections.

### Dictionaries

Year	Title (author/compiler)	Source
1678	<i>New World of Words</i> (Edward Phillips)	ECCO
1680	<i>English Expositour</i> ('J.B.')	ECCO
1704	<i>Cocker's English Dictionary</i> (Cocker)	ECCO

(Continues)



(Continued)

Year	Title (author/compiler)	Source
1715	<i>Cocker's English Dictionary</i> (Cocker)	ECCO
1721	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (Nathan Bailey)	ECCO
1724	<i>Cocker's English Dictionary</i> (Cocker)	ECCO
1745	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (Nathan Bailey)	ECCO
1755–1756	<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> edn (Samuel Johnson)	ECCO
1764	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (M. Bayley)	ECCO
1764	<i>The Complete English Dictionary</i> (John Wesley)	ECCO
1775	<i>The New and Complete Dictionary of the English</i> (John Ash)	ECCO
1776	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (Nathan Bailey)	ECCO
1788	<i>The Royal Standard English Dictionary, First American Edition</i> (William Perry)	ECCO
1789	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (Nathan Bailey)	ECCO
1797	<i>Samuel Johnson's Junior School edition</i> (US)	ECCO
1799	<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> , 8 <sup>th</sup> edn (Rev. James Barclay)	ECCO
1800	<i>An Universal Etymological English Dictionary</i> (Nathan Bailey)	ECCO
1800	<i>Columbian Dictionary</i> (US)	ECCO
1802	<i>John Walker's Critical Pronouncing Dictionary</i>	EULSC
1813	<i>A Complete and Universal Dictionary</i> (Rev. James Barclay)	EULSC
1818	<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> , ??? edn (Samuel Johnson)	EULSC
1828	<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> (S. Johnson and J. Walker)	EULSC
1832	<i>A Dictionary of the English Language</i> (Noah Webster)	EULSC
1845	<i>Webster's Dictionary, Vol. 1, An American Dictionary of the English Language</i>	EULSC
1850	<i>The Imperial Dictionary, English, technological, and scientific</i> (John Ogilvie)	ELSC
1862–1867	<i>The Royal Dictionary-Cyclopaedia for Universal Reference</i> (Thomas Wright)	EULSC
1882	<i>Imperial of the English language</i> (John Ogilvie)	EUL

(Continued)

Year	Title (author/compiler)	Source
1882	<i>An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language</i> (Walter W. Skeat)	EULSC
1893	<i>Nuttall's Standard Dictionary of the English Language</i> , revised by James Woods	EUL

## Encyclopedias

Year	Title (location of publication)	Source
1771	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> edn	EULSC
1778	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> edn. ('greatly improved and enlarged')	EULSC
1788?	<i>New Royal Encyclopedia</i>	EULSC
1790–1798	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i> , (Dublin edn.)	EULSC
1797	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> edn.	EULSC
1826	<i>Encyclopaedia Londonensis</i>	EULSC
1829	<i>London Encyclopaedia</i>	EULSC
1830	<i>Edinburgh Encyclopaedia</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> edn	EULSC
1832	<i>Encyclopedia Americana</i>	EULSC
1845	<i>Encyclopaedia Metropolitana</i> (edn.?)	EULSC
1862	<i>Chambers's Encyclopaedia</i>	EULSC
1876	<i>Chambers's Encyclopaedia</i> , revised edn.	EUL
1878	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 9 <sup>th</sup> edn.,	EULSC
1879	<i>Globe Encyclopaedia</i> (Edinburgh)	EULSC
1884	<i>Chambers's Encyclopaedia</i>	EULSC
1885-89	<i>Encyclopedia Americana</i> (in conjunction with <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> )	EULSC
1903	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 10 <sup>th</sup> edn	EULSC
1911	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 11 <sup>th</sup> edn	EULSC
1926	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 13 <sup>th</sup> edn.	EULSC
1929	<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 14 <sup>th</sup> edn	EULSC
1930–1935	<i>Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences</i>	EULSC
1936	<i>Chambers's Encyclopaedia</i>	EULSC
1966	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i>	EULSC
1968	<i>International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences</i>	EULSC
1974	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i> , 15 <sup>th</sup> edn	EULSC

(Continues)

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Year	Title (location of publication)	Source
1981	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i>	EULSC
1991	<i>The New Encyclopedia Britannica</i> , 15 <sup>th</sup> edn (Micropedia)	EULSC
1995	<i>Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia</i>	EUL
1996	<i>The Social Science Encyclopedia</i> (Kuper and Kuper, eds)	EULSC