



## History of Anthropology Newsletter

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# Histories of the Human Sciences: Different Disciplinary Perspectives

Joy Rohde

In short, as a propagandist, agitator and polemicist  
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

(Chorus)

In short, as a propagandist, agitator and polemicist  
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

In fact when I begin to try to fight against bureaucracy  
To criticise myself a bit, and practice more democracy,  
And bringing Marx's teachings up to date I'm much more wary at,  
And when I've done with phrases like "impoverished proletariat";  
When I've learned that workers think that nothing can be sillier,  
Than "monolithic unity" and biased Russophilia -  
Then people will exclaim: "Hurrah! He's not a stupid sap at all!  
A better Marxist-Leninist. has never studied Capital!"

(Chorus)

A better Marxist-Leninist. has never studied Capital! etc

My policies and theories have an air of unreality  
Because I am a victim of the cult of personality  
But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist  
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

(Chorus)

But still, as propagandist, agitator and polemicist  
I am the very model of a modern Marxist-Leninist.

(Recorded by Dan O'Meara at the University of Dar Es Salaam in the early 1970s)

## **HISTORIES OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES: DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES**

Joy Rohde

University of Pennsylvania

On May 6, scholars convened at the University of Pennsylvania to attend the day-long conference, "Histories of the Human Sciences: Different Disciplinary Perspectives." Conference organizer Henrika Kuklick began the day by welcoming participants and thanking the Department of the History and Sociology of Science for sponsoring the event. The conference brought together historians and practicing social scientists united by their interest in the history of the human sciences. Three paper sessions and a final roundtable provoked ample and stimulating discussion and pointed to new directions in the field.

The conference's first session assembled practitioners of psychology, economics and anthropology. University of Illinois anthropologist Matti Bunzl provided an excellent

example of the way that the history of social science can inform contemporary debates among anthropologists. Troubled by the disappearance of anthropology from the public sphere, Bunzl argued that postmodern anthropology's avoidance of generalization—characterized at its most extreme by the disavowal of the culture concept itself as an “essentialized abstraction”—has made the discipline irrelevant to public debate by producing an unwieldy body of descriptive knowledge. Bunzl suggested that anthropologists reconsider the approach of the interwar Boasian cultural anthropologists, who invoked the culture concept as a useful abstraction endowed with analytical utility to seek a middle ground between generalization and specificity. Although aware of George Stocking's injunction against ‘presentist’ history, Bunzl illustrated the value of nuanced disciplinary histories for practitioners and historians alike.

Bunzl's co-panelists, Wesleyan University psychologist Jill Morawski and University of Notre Dame economist Philip Mirowski, took historicist approaches toward their disciplines. Morawski extended her examination of reflexivity in psychology through an artful history of experimental psychology's concern about the relationship between the subject and subjectivity during the Cold War. Mirroring postwar American culture, psychologists were suspicious of the veracity and autonomy of both the experimental subject and the experimenter, bogging researchers down for a time in unproductive ruminations on the nature of reality itself. Mirowski, in his characteristically provocative style, attacked the commonplace claim that economists have successfully developed an economics of knowledge, for his historical study shows that they have never reconciled the concept of “information” with the neoliberal model of the marketplace. In a lively discussion following the papers, conference participants pointed out that economics has been much more successful than other human sciences in attracting funding and prestige. This panel suggested to a number of audience members that the most successful human science was the one that did not fret over the epistemic details, but instead charged ahead unhindered by reflexivity.

The day's second session gave historians a turn at the podium. John Carson, Director of the Program in Science, Technology and Society at the University of Michigan, introduced his new research project on the history of psychological expertise in the courts. Carson argued that medical practitioners in the nineteenth century courtroom were engaged in “a double act of bodily fashioning.” At the same time as they had to appear to be laying bare transparent and self-evident facts to the jury, expert witnesses had to “manipulate their evidence” to demonstrate the mental soundness or unsoundness of the individual in question without appearing to be manufacturing her behavior. University of California at Santa Barbara historian Alice O'Connor, best known for her highly acclaimed Poverty Knowledge, explored the tight links between conservative philanthropies and the rise of conservative think tanks in the 1970s through a history of the Manhattan Institute. O'Connor demonstrated that New York's urban crisis served as a “crucible” for galvanizing the new activism of the American Right and creating a counter-intelligentsia. The Institute, despite the superficiality of the knowledge it produced, was highly successful in its mission to position itself as “outside of and against the academy.” While Left-liberal social scientists agonized about the relationship between knowledge and power, O'Connor argued that the Institute's thinkers showed “a total willingness to use knowledge as an instrument of power.” The final contribution to the panel by Leila Zenderland, Professor of American Studies at California State University at Fullerton, called participants' attention to a tradition

of Yiddish language social research developed in Lithuania during the 1930s. Zenderland highlighted the different answers to the question “Knowledge for What?” raised by American social scientist Robert Lynd and Eastern European Jewish researchers, especially Max Weinreich. While Lynd argued that knowledge should be used for social transformation, Weinreich viewed social science as a tool to protect the minds of stigmatized despised social groups like Eastern European Jews from the mental and psychological damage of prejudice.

The conference’s final paper session brought the perspectives of scholars from literature departments to bear on the history of the human sciences. Susan Hegeman of the University of Florida argued that the culture concept gained popularity in the 1960s because it accommodated the uneasy similarities and differences shared by participants in the various rights movements of the 1960s. Hegeman hypothesized that cultural studies has declined in importance because the problems that led to the “cultural turn” seem less pressing, as concerns about globalization have replaced interest in identity politics. Temple University’s Peter Logan presented his research on the construction of fetishism by European colonizers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Positing that fetishism is based in a triangular relationship between fetish, fetishist, and critic (often an anthropologist or psychologist), Logan demonstrated that fetishism was an invention of Europe, not of the colonial periphery. Finally, Barbara Hernstein Smith of Duke University and Brown University presented a fascinating history of psychological research into millenarian movements in the 1950s. Drawing on the theory of cognitive conservatism—the idea that people are generally unlikely to change their beliefs simply because they are confronted with facts to the contrary—she debunked the “secularization thesis”—the idea that as science progresses, religion loses its importance and following. While all of these interesting contributions appear at first glance to be disparate, John Carson pointed out that each paper illustrated different approaches that the human science disciplines have taken to contradiction—the contradictions of belief and fact in the case of millenarians and the scientists who studied them; the contradictions of primitive and civilized man in the case of fetishism; and the contradictions of similarity and difference in cultural theory.

The final section of the conference presented Princeton’s Elizabeth Lunbeck and Helen Tilley (who bravely agreed to fill the shoes of George Stocking, who was unavoidably prevented from attending as he had originally planned), and new University of Pennsylvania faculty member John Tresch with the hefty task of reflecting on the day’s many intellectual contributions. Lunbeck posited that we have in fact returned to the middle ground between similarity and difference, positivism and postmodernism, to which Bunzl aspired. Tresch pointed out that by bringing together the histories of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and economics in a single conference, participants gained a sense of the different ways that disciplines have dealt with the challenge of reflexivity, the variety of social locations in which social science operates, and the relative efficacies of the different sciences. And Tilley, a historian of medicine and science in Africa, reminded participants of the importance of non-Western traditions in the human sciences. She challenged the audience to ask: how much does place matter to the human science disciplines and to our histories of them? Is geographic movement a detriment to a discipline’s status? Is a discipline that renders place invisible more successful than one that does not?

In all, the conference left participants with a number of exciting challenges. Tilley's comments and the papers by Zenderland and O'Connor suggested that historians of the human sciences might be well-served by moving away from canonical texts and elite academics towards other sites of knowledge production. Bunzl and Hegeman's contributions indicate that it is time that historians of the human sciences explore in more detail the impact of postmodern thought on the human sciences and social theory. And finally, discussions of the multiple registers of power that inhere in knowledge suggested to all participants that we interrogate our own relationship to the loci of power in twenty-first century America.

#### RECENT DISSERTATIONS

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#### RECENT BIBLIOGRAPHY

[Occasionally, readers call our attention to errors in the entries, usually of a minor typographical character. Under the pressure of getting HAN out, some proofreading errors occasionally slip by. For these we offer a blanket apology, but will not normally attempt corrections. We call attention to the listings in the Bulletin of the History of Archaeology, the entries in the annual bibliographies of Isis, and those in the Bulletin d'information de la SFHSH (Société française pour l'histoire des sciences de l'homme)— each of which takes information from HAN, as we do from them. We welcome and encourage bibliographic suggestions from our readers.]

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