

Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine (editors) (2010) *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-71776-2 (paperback)

I was reading *The History of the Social Sciences*, when I received on my inbox Philip Mirowski's review of the book for EH-NET (SHOE list 19th of November 2010). It is good practice in reviewing books to pretend that one's reading is an isolated act of scholarly judgment, without influence of conversation with peers or the occasional glimpse at the next guy's review. Mirowski by force of words does not permit such veils. Among dark humor and other uncharitable remarks, he dubbed the volume "admirable in its motives" but "frustrating in execution", ultimately a "quixotic quest". As I continued my reading, Mirowski's words haunted me. The reason I could not exorcise the specter was because it had some truth to communicate.

The crux of Mirowski's complaints is that the "social sciences" may lack "a coherent center" and without it there can be no "plausible narrative line". "That is, does it resemble one of those penny dreadful non-histories of entities like "salt" or "dirt" or the "wisdom of crowds," where the primary protagonist lacks solidity and identity through time?" I worry about any demand that the subjects of history be stable protagonists. Narrative does not need protagonists. Igor Kopytoff's 1986 sacred argument for "The cultural biography of things" imagines how the biography of a car in Africa would be revealing of families' finances, commercial networks and mobility in the continent's fraught social landscape. The car, the thing, is not the protagonist, but a node connecting a bewildering mass of agencies. More importantly history need not begin with stability. "Economics" is hardly stable. Outside academic departments and AEA conventions, economic knowledge is contested. Like scientists' constructing the subjects of their study, from sub-atomic spins, to DNA, to aggregate savings, so do historians construct "economics" conferring it stability and identity. They do so every time they revisit an established canon, and when they write overlapping stories about the great men. Contra Mirowski, my concern is not whether there is inherent stability and identity in the "social sciences", there isn't. Instead, I ask this volume to construct its object in a plausible and compelling way and through it reveal fresh insights on social knowledge post 1945.

The collected papers in this volume were the outcome of a seminar series hosted at the London School of Economics and Political Science and financed by the Leverhulme Trust. Backhouse and Fontaine audited many papers and authors in the years of the project, and selected for publication items on "Psychology", "Economics" (by Backhouse), "Political Science", "Sociology", "Social Anthropology" and "Human Geography." To impose order on the contributions they asked a set of questions to the authors. All chapters answered the queries even if at times as a concluding afterthought. The questions that loomed larger were the impact of the second world war, the prominence of American scholarship in the international landscape, what relationships existed between the social sciences, and how events such as the Cold War and 1960s/1970s social upheavals changed the course of the sciences. It is an achievement to have these themes treated from the various disciplinary standpoints. The questions selected by the editors suggests to me a concern for structure. In my paraphrase: where lay the dominant flows (methodological, personal) and how disciplines and countries rank across time? Like Mirowski I am a bit disappointed. But we differ on the reasons why. The volume's shortcomings lie with an attempt to construct a synthetic history by addition. The chapters are too respectful of disciplinary turf: economist writes on economists, sociologist on sociologists, political scientist on political science histories. Socialization into an academic discipline does not train one to see beyond the threshold. It does the exact opposite, it reifies the threshold. And it is not just a matter of staff, by the authors chosen to author the chapters, since the concluding lines of the final chapter also treat each discipline in separate paragraphs. It is a matter of design.

In the final chapter “Toward a History of the Social Sciences” in a tone that is not programmatic, but knowledgeable and authoritative, the focus turns to cross-disciplinary ventures: Yale's Institute of Human Relations, Harvard's Department of Social Relations, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, and MIT's Center for International Studies, to name the most prominent. Here too structure is a preeminent concern, splitting ventures where a “protean” psychology was the dominant discipline from others where economics, more assertive and self-confident, was master and commander. The cross-disciplinary cases are a good counter to the “straight” disciplinary accounts that fill the volume, but they do not transcend a disciplinary imagination. My suggestion is that the construction of a narrative on the “social sciences” need not be built from the histories of the social sciences individually, and have them as protagonists. In my reading of the volume and of other literature on the social sciences collectively, the entity is instantiated throughout the 20th century, pre and post 1945, in connection with utopian projects: be it to develop the global South, to save hearts and minds from communism, to cure souls broken by poverty, or to bring about racial harmony. Social sciences exist where the University meets the State, the philanthropies, and business, and where dollars hit the road. In America at least, but plausibly in Continental Europe too, discourse on the social sciences is a discourse of proactive transformation. The volume offers a wealth of clues to construct such an account. All chapters touch these complex contextual relationships, with greater self awareness in the concluding chapter, and the ones devoted to political science and social anthropology. (The grave exception is the one on “Sociology” that is too preoccupied with the demography of the profession and amassing evidence to contradict any proposed narrative account of its development.). Although the volume does not write the history of the social sciences, it provides resources of begin that labour.

The *History of the Social Sciences* achieves what it set out to do. It is a great reference for the advanced student wanting an entry into the histories of individual social sciences. But more importantly, it is a seminal step towards a history that is possible, important and needed.