

History, the social sciences and potentials for cooperation

With particular attention to economic history*

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In the view of certain experts, the general historicization of the social sciences since the 1960s, reflecting above all experience with developing countries, has here and there reached Western economics, as well [...]. [T]he days of pure economics appear to be numbered with the breakthrough of a socio-economic standpoint that encompasses the historical dimension. The constellation is favourable. The lessons offered by transformation processes in the ›Third World‹ point in this direction, as do the revival of scientific neo-Marxism and the outcomes of many a debate in the discipline.

Thus begins the introduction to Hans-Ulrich Wehler's influential reader on *History and Economics* from 1973 (Wehler 1973: 11). Even then, this was much more an expression of hope than a sober assessment of the situation. The hopes pinned on the historicization of economics were consonant with the strong expectations of ever closer bonds between history and the social sciences, connections that had developed and proved their value in various new approaches in international history since the 1930s. Such new developments were promoted at different places, in France in the pages of *Annales*, in Britain by Marxist historians

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close to the journal *Past & Present*, in the United States by representatives of historical sociology as well as, in other ways, in the ›New Economic History‹ of the 1950s and 1960s, and in West Germany in social history and ›historical social science‹ (*Historische Sozialwissenschaft*) that emerged in the 1960s.

What did these various currents have in common? Firstly, they all stressed structures and processes over actions, persons, and events as dimensions of investigation. Secondly, they adopted analytic approaches that went beyond a hermeneutic reconstruction of meanings. In the 1960s and 1970s, this meant seeking the explicit definition of concepts, experimenting with theoretical orientation, sometimes turning to quantifying procedures, and applying comparative approaches. Thirdly, in both programme and practice they sought close cooperation with systematic neighbouring disciplines, especially sociology, political science, and economics. Fourthly, they tended to emphasize the economic dimension as a subject of study and as an explanatory category, albeit in very different forms. And fifth: At least in West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, all this developed in a politico-intellectual atmosphere fraught with criticism of tradition and imbued with hopes for reform, both with respect to academic practices and to society at large, frequently with more or less leftwing orientation, but nevertheless in very different ways (Iggers 1984; Raphael 2003).¹

1 In 2008, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm (*1917) noted: »I had the luck of belonging to a worldwide generation of historians who revolutionised historiography between the thirties and the historiographical turn in the seventies of the last century, mainly through new links between history and the social sciences. It was not simply a matter of a single ideological school. It was about the struggle of historical modernity against the old, conventional historiography of Ranke, whether under the banner of economic history, French sociology and geography as in the *Annales*, of Marxism or of Max Weber« (Botz et al. 2008: 74).

On the whole this turned out to be to the advantage of economic history. This subdiscipline of history (cf. Schulz et al. 2004), with a strong tradition dating back to the late 19th century, attracted increasing interest – often together with social history – from students and the public, arousing great expectations that it could enhance the explanatory power of history as a whole as well as the historical interpretation of the present.

Moving apart

In the decades that followed, some of the high-flying hopes were met, the programme of ›historical social science‹ made an impression, but on the whole it remained a minority phenomenon, and since the late 1970s and 1980s the relationship between history and the social sciences changed, becoming more distant again. The following sketch is extremely abbreviated and informed by a German perspective.²

Over the last decades, a wide variety of developments have taken place in the field of history, including a powerful trend away from social history to cultural history. In the 1980s, the proponents of the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) criticized the structural bias of earlier economic and social history. They called for greater attention to be paid to actions, perceptions, and experiences – the subjective dimension of history. Interest was soon to grow in the reconstruction of symbolic forms and the interpretation of cultural practices. Whereas the focus had often been on broad structures and processes, the charm of micro-historical approaches was now discovered. This was sometimes accompanied by sweeping mistrust of big concepts and analytic approaches. ›Why‹ questions were up-staged by ›how‹ questions. New emphasis was placed on narrativity. Language became more and more important, both as a subject of research and as a reflective medium of research and presentation. The history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) served as a bridge between social and cultural history, increasingly in a constructivist spirit with

2 For accounts of the British, French and US-American experience see Sewell 2005: 22-80; Eley 2005.

much sense for the formative power of ideas, concepts, and categories both in the past itself and in the act of investigating it. All this did not mean that the preceding paradigm was simply displaced. Rather, conflicts were numerous and new combinations were forged. Whereas Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Jürgen Habermas had in the past lent social scientific force to historical studies, they were now often succeeded by Clifford Geertz and Georg Simmel, Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other anthropologists and post-modern thinkers. But frequently, theoretical orientations were now dispensed with altogether. In all, the dominant reasons for studying history had shifted. The main concern had once been to learn from history. Now, history became interesting as a basis of gaining identity or as a way of dealing with the other (Iggers 2005; Iggers & Wang 2008: 270-316; Conrad & Kessel 1994; Kocka 2003; Kocka 2006).

Certainly, economics as a discipline have not been historicized over the last decades. Something like an action and micro-theoretical turn may have taken place within the field. But it focussed attention on the achievements and claims of an a-historical theory of humanity. Economics has continued to be strong in formalized models. It attributes its theoretical productivity to the abstraction from cultural factors and historical contexts and operates with a timeless concept of man. It is thus in stark contradiction to the historical and cultural sciences, which see human nature not as an anthropological constant but as the outcome of historical processes. From the perspective of a historian, the economists' a-historical ways of looking on human reality are extremely under-complex and simplistic – in spite of its sophisticated theoretical apparatus which is difficult to understand from the outside.

This holds true despite theoretical discussions and developments in the discipline which have challenged and changed the self-interest maxim of traditional, main-stream economics, redefined the concept of rationality, and moved away from the traditional homo oeconomicus model so frequently criticized.

Economics, to a large part, are a highly professionalized and self-satisfied discipline which mostly cooperates only reluctantly with history and other social sciences. It believes it does not need their help. On the contrary, it understands itself increasingly as a general science of action not restricted to the market sphere. With its own premises and issues, it has embarked on the investigation of areas – such as the family, fashion, or politics – traditionally the domain of other social sciences and history (Hodgson 2001; Tanner 2004; Biervert & Wieland 1990).

What can be said in a few words about political science? Some of its practitioners are interested in broadly based comparative research with an historical depth of field, e. g. Theda Skocpol, Peter Hall, or Kathleen Thelen. The Committee on History and Political Science established by the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1990 soon had several hundred members. Influential German political scientists, too, exercise their interest in historical approaches, for example Klaus von Beyme and Manfred Schmidt. On the other hand, Peter Hall has recently criticized the growing de-historicization of American political science, describing its increasing preoccupation with the rational choice paradigm, which is more interested in the effects of preferences than in their origins, changes, and volatilities.

Over the past twenty-five years, social science has changed dramatically. The most striking development, especially in America, has been a bifurcation, separating scholars interested in culture from those concerned with material forces. On one side of the yard, history and anthropology have moved closer to cultural studies. On the other, political science has edged toward economics. Like the kid left to play alone, American sociology has flirted with the others without being able to draw them into a game of its own (Hall 2007: 127).

As far as developments in sociology are concerned, it is even more difficult to generalize. Without a doubt, many sociologists have contributed greatly to developing the program of a historical social science in Germany, among them Max Weber and C. Wright Mills, Ralf Dahrendorf and Charles Tilly, M. Rainer Lepsius and Wolfgang Schluchter, to mention only a few. Historians have continued to benefit greatly from the

work of sociologists who take an interest in history or are at least open to history, from comparative historical sociology in the social sciences (e.g. Shmuel Eisenstadt, Björn Wittrock, Dietrich Rueschmeier) to impressive contributions by historical sociologists (e.g. Michael Mann) and influential theoreticians like Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, who are also frequently quoted by social historians. Recently, the sociologist Wolfgang Streeck published a study on capitalism in Germany in which he advocated and practiced a close combination of the social sciences and history (Streeck 2009). On the other hand, in Germany the places where historians and sociologists work together in more than sporadic fashion are few and far between, far more so than thirty to forty years ago. Without a doubt, there has been no general historicization of sociology. Historians and social scientists, not least sociologists, continue to differ greatly in their interests, languages, footnote methods and forms of presentation. The vision of a ›historical social science‹ that merges elements of the participating disciplines has not been realised when it comes to history and sociology, either (Adams et al. 2005; Ellrich 2000; Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003; Wehler 2000; Welskopp 2005).

There are exceptions to the trends discussed. There are new alliances that have replaced old ones, for instance between social and cultural history on the one hand, and cultural anthropology and ethnology on the other. There is a great deal of interdisciplinary cooperation in individual problem-oriented fields such as research on violence, ageing, migration, integration, and conflicts. These fields are by themselves extremely diverse. But as far as the relationship between history and economics, political science, and sociology is concerned, the boundaries have not become more permeable over the past three to four decades. On the contrary, the disciplines have remained much more self-contained than the proponents of a ›historical social science‹ had envisaged in the 1970s.

Economic history remains a lively, internally diverse and productive field. But on the whole it has lost ground in recent decades, in Germany and other countries. Its decline is evident in the shrinking number of positions and in shrinking attention for results of economic history research outside the subdiscipline itself. The shifts within history I have

outlined above have reduced faith in the explanatory power of economic factors and have lowered the expectations with respect to economic history among general historians and their audiences. Presently, social historians far more frequently lean towards cultural history than towards economic history as they had in the past (Conrad 2001). For their part, economists continue to take an only moderate interest in economic history.

New opportunities and approaches at cooperation

However – now I come to the more optimistic part of this paper – new opportunities and new approaches at cooperation between economic history and economics, between history and the social sciences have emerged in recent times. Let me first deal with two changes within the field of economics before turning to recent developments in the study of history.

First, a highly interesting discussion has been taking place between economists and science theoreticians on the foundations of economics, which has come to my attention primarily through economic historians such as Hansjörg Siegenthaler and Jakob Tanner (Siegenthaler 1999; Tanner 2004). The advance of game theory has informed a few economists who have abandoned the notion of the individual as a utility-maximising monad to concern themselves with interactional relations and decision-making procedures; and hence, in principle at least, with the changing world in which interaction takes place and decisions are made. This movement goes beyond the methodological individualism that has marked traditional economics. Along similar lines, there is the discussion on ›bounded rationality‹, which by its more radical manifestations is well on the way to denying the construct of the utility-optimizing individual (Gigerenzer & Selten 2001; Siegenthaler 2005). Insight into the often very limited ability of individuals to weigh up alternatives in fully informed fashion and to choose rationally between them and their opportunity costs has directed attention to the important role of ›stop rules‹ and decision shortcuts, which in turn have to do with habits, shared conventions, mental models, and with processes of understanding and learning. These again are in varying measure path depend-

ent and have a history. Neurobiological research appears to confirm this. In principle and in the intra-disciplinary cogitations of certain economists – at least among a small, reflective minority in their field – this would seem to clear a broad path to history, to the cultural sciences, and to a reflective economic history, in principle.

There is a second development in economics that commends cooperation with economic history: the persistence and further development of institutional economics. When Douglass North and others lent it new impetus around 1970, especially in addressing the property rights paradigm, Knut Borchardt explicitly pointed out how much this had been anticipated by scholars such as Gustav Schmoller and Werner Sombart from the German Historical School of Economics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Borchardt 1977). New Institutional Economics address the historical setting of economic processes. It asks about the rules and norms of markets. Who draws them up and monitors them? What does it cost to sanction breaches of the rules? When and why do the institutional arrangements of a society change? What are the consequences of, for example, a shift from collective to individual rights of disposal? A broad concept of institution is commonly used, covering all sorts of regulatory systems from law to conventions, standards and customs (North 1990; Richter & Furubotn 1996).

This opens the door wide to cooperation with historians who – like Werner Abelshauser and Volker Berghahn – discuss, together with other social scientists, the performance and limits of the German (»Rhenish«) model of capitalism with its high degree of organized coordination, in comparison to other more market-based varieties of capitalism in Britain and the US. Business history, dealing, for example, with transaction costs or entrepreneurial networks, also addresses issues of institutional economics (Abelshauser 1999 and 2005; Berghahn & Vitols 2006; Berghoff & Sydow 2007; Berghoff & Vogel 2004a; Hall & Soskice 2001; Thelen 2004; Streeck & Thelen 2005).

Economic sociology broadens and extends the issues treated by institutional economics beyond the institutional. Jens Beckert and Richard Swedberg, two major authors in this field, point out that the role of

social, cultural, and political conditions for the operation of economic exchange systems is a classical sociological issue, long relegated to the background after 1945 before reviving since the 1980s. They speculate about the reasons for the renewed interest in economic sociology:

The changes from Fordist regulation to more flexible types of organizational structures, the transformation of Eastern European economies, and the process of globalization make the economy appear to be in a state of dramatic change with the final outcome, the implications and sometimes even the directions as yet unclear. These economic changes will have profound effects on society at large. They will change the role of the state, will change non-economic variables like social capital into important economic resources, and they will affect the family through radical changes in types of employment. But on the basis of which theory can these changes be understood? (Beckert & Swedberg 2001: 381 f.)³

Their answer is to point to the need for a new link between economics and sociology. It should be added that this situation offers an opportunity to connect with historical and economic history research, as long as the economic historians involved do not adopt too narrow a perspective but argue on a broad front, addressing questions such as trust, religion, family structures, networks, and the state (Beckert 2002, 2007; Beckert et al. 2007; Smelser & Swedberg 2005).

So much about some of the changes outside economic history and outside history that open up new paths to cooperation. But changes have also been taking place in history that are worth looking at. Again, I will concentrate on two complex developments.

(1) The culturalistic turn in history has frequently led historians to neglect economic history and economic issues. But the cultural history turn can also open up new types of access to economic history which could be of interest for economists and other social scientists. This has been

3 Karl Polanyi's classical study on the embeddedness of capitalist economies receives new attention, see Polanyi 1944 and 1957/2001.

cogently demonstrated in »Economic History as Cultural History«, edited by Hartmut Berghoff und Jakob Vogel (Berghoff & Vogel 2004b). I cite some examples from this volume and refer to further studies.

Some scholars like Adam Tooze and Robert Salais, convinced of the formative power of language, address the history of concepts and examine the categories used by social scientists and statisticians for mapping societies of the past, such as »workers« and »employees«, »labor« and »unemployment«. They not only try to find out which social realities were reflected by the emergence and diffusion of such concepts. They also explore how such frequently used concepts helped to structure and shape societies of the past: the semantic mapping of social reality as a contribution to forming social identities, groups, and classes (Conze 1972; Tooze 2001, 2004; Salais 1986).

There are studies on the history of labor (or work) and on how these concepts were differently defined between countries and languages, in theoretical treatises as well as in the language of collective bargaining or social policy. This way they investigate work experiences and labor relations in the interaction between tradition, markets, and government intervention (Biernacki 1995; Zimmermann 2001).

There is the booming history of consumption, concerned, among other things, with the interplay between cultural orientation, gender, and market behavior, extending into the history of commercial and service companies, which, at least in Germany, is traditionally less well researched than the history of manufacturing enterprises (Haupt & Torp 2009).

There is the micro-historical study on a North Italian village in the late 17th century by Giovanni Levi. Using sophisticated methods, this economic and cultural historian shows how very much transactions in this village, decisions on buying and selling, were embedded in a supra-individual network of relationships in which honour, reciprocity, and self-interest were linked over the times and were thus part of a »culture«. According to Christoph Conrad,

the crux of Levi's reconstruction is that he exposes the atomisation of individual transactions and actors as an illusion. Even so banal an act as

buying an animal or a small garden plot can be explained only by the network of social, familial, and symbolic determinants. The micro-analysis thus reconstructs a covert collective reality concealed by the atomisation of civil law categories and thus of sources. Levi impressively shows how dependent the individual economic actor was on social practice before he became the focus of liberal economic theory (Conrad 2004: 55; Levi 1989).

Finally I mention the research done by a group under Pierre Bourdieu on home ownership among skilled worker and white collar worker families in the Paris banlieue. The study investigates the »social structures of the economy« (Bourdieu 2005). In particular, it looks at »how preferences arise and are disseminated in a society that render such notions as »sense of property«, »leafy suburb«, and »being my own boss«, understandable [...]. Government capital formation programs are examined, as are advertising images and leitmotifs, individual sales talks and loan negotiations.« Christoph Conrad concludes: »In this context of a cultural history of the economy, the point is not to trace societal conditioning in preference formation – every economist would admit that – but to understand the economic actor model itself as the outcome of societal and cultural preparation« (Conrad 2004: 59; see also Nolte 1997; Haskell & Teichgraeber 1993).

These few examples should suffice to demonstrate that the culturalistic turn in history over the past two decades offers not only risks but also opportunities for renewing economic history. However, only if two conditions are met: First, discourse and conceptual history must be linked to the history of practices, which is difficult to achieve. Secondly, economic history benefits only if it adopts a broad understanding of its tasks and does not restrict itself to economic matters in the narrower sense, for instance the issue of efficiency. Then it can produce results that should also be interesting for economists and social scientists if, for example, they are interested in the embeddedness, emergence, and preconditions of markets.

(2) Bernard Bailyn recently identified as »one of the deepest tendencies of late-twentieth-century historiography: the impulse to expand the range

of inquiry, to rescale major events and trends into larger settings, and to seek heightened understanding at a more elevated and generalized plane. In every sphere of historical study – intellectual, cultural, political – the scope of inquiry has broadened. Large-scale comparisons and parallels are explored, national stories become regional, and regional studies become global« (Bailyn 2009: 44).

Indeed, transnational, interregional and global approaches are quickly gaining ground and make it presently the single most important trend in the discipline. With a certain necessity, this trend reinvigorates some basic principles of »historical social science«: attention for large-scale structures and comprehensive processes, the sharp definition of concepts and analytical rigor, explicit reflections on the choice of concepts, on decisions about space and time of investigation and on epistemological implications. The relation between comparative history and entangled history is intensively debated. Eurocentrism and Western biases are to be overcome in a productive way. All this also leads to a renewal of theoretical considerations within the practice of history. It may lead historians to a new openness vis-à-vis social science approaches (Haupt & Kocka 2009; Osterhammel 2009; Conrad et al. 2007).

All this holds particularly true with respect to economic and social historical studies in the expanding field of global history. Just a few examples: The debate on the »Great Divergence« between economic developments in (parts of) China and (parts of) Britain in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries is a good case in point. New studies on global labor history profit from social science concepts and models (capitalism, class formation), if only with the goal of modifying them with respect to the Non-Western world. Anyway, historians' interest in the world historical phenomenon of capitalism seems to grow again, including interest in classical theorists from Adam Smith and Karl Marx to Joseph Schumpeter and Karl Polanyi. The present financial and economic crisis strengthens public and academic concerns for capitalism and for analytical approaches which may guide its historical investigation (Appleby 2010; O'Brien 2006; Kocka 2010; Pomeranz 2000; Van der Linden 2008; Vries 2003).

Outlook: What history has to offer to the social sciences

No doubt, there are many historians who do their work without drawing from the resources of the social sciences. On the other hand, most economists as well as many sociologists and political scientists define their topics and investigate them without any historical orientation. But there is an area of cooperation and overlap in which historians and social scientists meet in ways useful for both sides. This area is growing again.

On the one hand historians can use pertinent concepts, models and theories from the social sciences in order to specify their questions and define their subject of study, develop explanatory hypotheses and structure their »narratives« (or better: argumentations). Sometimes they find methods useful which have been developed in the social sciences, e. g. when handling mass data. Dialogues with social scientists may help them to reflect upon the conditions, particularities and consequences of their procedures. Usually they make very selective use of the reservoir of social science ideas, concepts and methods, and they incorporate them into argumentations of their own. The more historians are ready again to deal with the conditions and consequences of events, experiences, discourses and actions, i. e. with structures and processes, the more urgent it becomes for them to utilize social science resources for historical investigations. This holds particularly true for economic history (Kocka 1977, 1986: 83-89; Meran 1985; Tilly 1982).

On the other hand, in this article several examples were given to show how research in economics and other social sciences might profit from historical approaches and insights. On a more general level, I want to underline two contributions which history can make to social science research and its presentation.⁴

First, historians take contexts serious. They insist on the reconstruction of contexts and are sceptical vis-à-vis the rapid isolation and selective correlation of variables. Historians can offer help as to contextualization. They can demonstrate how economic, social, political, and cultural di-

4 With a similar thrust Sewell 2005.

mensions play together. They are specialists for embeddedness, arguably at least as much as the sociologists who have established embeddedness as a concept. This is where Robert Solow saw the most important service economic historians can offer to economic theorists:

Few things should be more interesting to a civilized economic theorist than the opportunity to observe the interplay between social institutions and economic behaviour over time and place [...]. Therefore an economic historian should be an observer and re-creator of the codes, loyalties and organizations which men create and which are just as real to them as physical conditions'. Add to that a command over two-stage least squares and you have the kind of economic historian from whom theorists have most to learn, if only they are willing to try (Solow 1985/2006, 241 f.).

Second, historians are interested in change over time. They tend to argue in terms of ›before‹ and ›after‹ (stressing simultaneity is another aspect of the same temporal logic). They know that new things emerge, but that they are influenced by preceding constellations. They are aware that observable structures of the present are going to change and will be different in the future. It is this temporal pattern of understanding human reality as a process which strongly influences the descriptions, explanations and interpretations of historians as much as they may differ from one another in other respects. It can also enhance the analytical power and the rhetorical effects of social scientists if they adopt such perspectives for parts of their argumentation. This would mean to analyze social systems as social processes. It would mean to perceive social phenomena of the present time as products of preceding constellations, processes and actions (in addition to analyzing them according to the rules of empirical social science). It would also mean not to expect that the future will be a mere prolongation of the present, but something different, although influenced by the present, and although the limits of variability can be ascertained as well. Following such a temporal perspective, historians sometimes concentrate on the emergence of problems, on attempts at problem solution and on non-intended consequences of such attempts. The dimension of time, the relation between past, present and

future, is central and defines the way in which reality is perceived. What historians can offer to social scientists are ways of temporalizing the social realities under investigation.⁵

This is an argument in favour of transfers across disciplinary lines, but not in favour of levelling the differences between disciplines. Historians can offer such impulses to economists and other social scientists only as long as they do not fully yield to the methodological rules and customs of their partners. To quote Robert Solow again:

As I inspect current work in economic history, I have the sinking feeling that a lot of it looks exactly like the kind of economic analysis I have just finished caricaturing: the same integrals, the same regressions, the same substitution of *t*-ratios for thought. Apart from anything else it is no fun reading the stuff anymore. Far from offering the economic theorist a wide range of perceptions, this sort of economic history gives back to the theorist the same routine gruel that the economic theorist gives to the historian. Why should I believe, when it is applied to thin eighteenth-century data, something that carries no conviction when it is done with more ample twentieth-century data? (Solow 1985/2006: 243)

This may be putting it a bit too strongly, but basically I find it convincing. The point is that economic history is important for economists and social scientists not only – and not primarily – when it adopts their approaches and applies them to past phenomena, but when it is self-assured enough to stick to basic principles of the historical discipline. Interdisciplinary cooperation presupposes disciplinary differentiation.

5 With a similar thrust Streeck 2009. The underlying perception of history as a discipline is sketched more thoroughly in Kocka 2008.

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