

BOOK REVIEWS

Roger E. Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine, eds., *A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 260, \$95. ISBN 978-1-107-03772-4.

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A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences, edited by Roger Backhouse and Philippe Fontaine, seems to be the end piece of their trilogy on the history of the social sciences. The other two (Backhouse and Fontaine 2010a, and Backhouse and Fontaine 2010b) were published four years earlier. The online description of the beginning piece, “The History of the Social Sciences since 1945,” emphasized that it has a chapter that “proposes a blueprint for a history of the social sciences as a whole.”¹ This aim of a history of “the social sciences as a whole” reappears as one of the two aims of the current book. The other is a “comparative interdisciplinary historiography of the social sciences” (p. 2). Although the editors use both aims interchangeably, in my view they differ.

There exist no social sciences “as a whole,” even though there were “extensive cross-disciplinary engagements” (p. 13). I assume that the latter is what Backhouse and Fontaine mean by “interdisciplinary”: namely, interactions across the disciplines, particularly with the *social* sciences. This actually begs the question of what is meant by “discipline” and, by implication, “interdisciplinarity.”

In my view, the term “discipline” nicely characterizes the nature of specializations in science *after* the Second World War, particularly in the way as Thomas Kuhn has defined “disciplinary matrix.” According to Kuhn (1970), a discipline is defined by four elements: 1. symbolic generalizations, which are expressions, deployed without question or dissent, that can readily be represented in logical or mathematical form; 2. metaphysics, which are the shared commitments to beliefs in particular models, including their heuristic value; 3. values, which do much to determine the discipline’s self-image; and 4. paradigms, exemplars, the concrete solutions to problems that students encounter from the beginning of their scientific education, whether in laboratories, in examinations, or in their science textbooks. This characterization shows that Kuhn had only natural science disciplines in mind, but is nevertheless indicative of how disciplines are also perceived in social science.

Most relevant for the discussion of the role of historiographies in science is Kuhn’s third element, values. Leo Corry considered them to compose the “image” of a discipline. The “image” addresses “questions about the discipline *qua* discipline” (1989, p. 411). These questions, which he called “second-order questions,” concern the methodology, philosophy, history, or sociology of the discipline.

¹This description can be found on the Cambridge University Press webpage of this book: <http://www.cambridge.org/nl/academic/subjects/economics/history-economic-thought-and-methodology/history-social-sciences-1945?format=PB>, accessed 13 June 2016.

Corry's account explains the interest within a discipline of writing its own history: to delineate its disciplinary "body." I use the term "delineation" deliberately to indicate that disciplinary histories are also written to draw lines between the discipline and the adjacent disciplines. This view on post-Second World War historiographies is confirmed by the editors and several of the volume's chapters:

The history of the social sciences after the Second World War is primarily written by social scientists, many of them interested in legitimizing current theoretical orientations or resuscitating older ones. Some social scientists may show greater historical sensibility ..., but as a rule "disciplinary history," ... focuses on one particular discipline and tends to ignore its relationships with others, with sociologists writing about the history of sociology, psychologists writing about the history of psychology, economists writing about the history of economics, and so on. (p. 8)

This picture, "central to the self-identity of some disciplines, that after 1945 the social sciences had developed in isolation from each other" (p. 13), contrasts, however, with another sketched by the editors: namely, one of "strong cross-disciplinary interactions within the social sciences during the war and in the two decades following it" (p. 6).

I can see that when disciplinary histories are written to form disciplinary identities, it is important that science historians maintain the emphasis on the existence of cross-disciplinary interactions, but that the editors repeated notification of these interactions also appears to me as the surprise of someone who discovers that the boundary lines on a map do not appear in the landscape itself. Interactions across various research practices have always existed, irrespective of whether historians or others addressing "second-order questions" have drawn lines here or there. That one can talk about these interactions in terms of crossing disciplines presumes, of course, the existence of disciplinary boundaries, which needs to be historically contextualized. "As intellectual historians concerned with previous centuries have long recognized, today's disciplinary boundaries previously did not exist, and letting them frame past writing, as when Adam Smith is viewed as contributing to the modern discipline of economics, is misleading" (p. 17).

The acknowledgment of these interactions does not, however, mean that there is something that can be called "social sciences as a whole." Current science is characterized by a "dappled world" of specialized fields,² called "disciplines," that interact with each other, and so do not develop in isolation from each other. Hence, unlike the editors, I am not surprised by the lack of a "systematic coverage of the development of the social sciences as a whole, or of the interactions among them" (p. 12) in the "landmark collection of essays," *The Modern Social Sciences* (2003), edited by Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross.

I am, however, surprised by the chosen structure of *A Historiography of the Modern Social Sciences*, "with separate chapters on individual social sciences" (p. 16). The editors provide the following clarification for this structure:

However, at the moment, this is probably the only sensible way to approach the problem because it reflects the way the bulk of literature has evolved. Separate literatures have

²I am sharing Nancy Cartwright's (1999) view that there is no one, unified science of the world possible, but instead that scientific knowledge is a patchwork of several different models and theories.

developed—on the individual social sciences and on historical problems that relate to the social sciences more generally—with the result that many of those who write on the history of the social sciences are well informed about their niche but show little awareness of historiographical developments within contexts other than their own.... As a result it is necessary to turn to specialists in the different social sciences to survey the historiography of their own field, for they can take to the table significant literatures with which the small number of historians working on the social sciences as a whole are not familiar.... There is thus a shortage of cross-disciplinary comparisons of historiographical traditions in the different social sciences that echoes disciplinary historians' neglect of cross-disciplinary engagements. (p. 16)

I am surprised because both editors seem to ignore a “bulk of literature” in history of science that disregards any disciplinary boundary and is focused on cross-disciplinary themes such as probability and uncertainty, measurement, objectivity, experiments, visualizations, etcetera. They could have invited those historians who have worked on these themes for the last few decades. Beside the contributors to *The Modern Social Sciences*, including Porter, Mary Morgan, and Margaret Schabas,³ there are historians like Lorraine Daston, Norton Wise, and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger who are leading in this kind of historical research, and who even ignore the natural–social science divide.

To put the editors' own aims aside, and assess the kind of book we have, it is indeed rich in content and highly informative to the historians of a certain discipline about historiographical developments in other disciplines. It contains a history of history, of anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and of political science. Every chapter provides a detailed survey of all the main contributions and developments within each discipline. As such, this volume could be better considered to be a reference work for the historiographies of the modern social disciplines, and, if so, one I do recommend.

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³To mention only those who are most familiar to the JHET reader.