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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/2

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Comment on Jean-Michel Chapoulie/2

by Johan Heilbron

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Jean-Michel Chapoulie's article is a timely and challenging contribution to the expanding research on the historical development of the social sciences. Although I agree with most of the points he makes, I see the significance of his paper in a slightly different manner than he presents it himself, a difference, furthermore, that has consequences for how one would define the research agenda in this area. Recalling his first work in the beginning of the 1980s, Chapoulie introduces his article by opposing the "conventional history" of the social sciences to a "truly historical approach." Since he bases his argument on the quest for a "truly historical" approach, he calls for a "standard history," which in "its intentions and its reasoning" would be similar to the history of any other sector or activity. While this argument has a lot for it, I would – somewhat paradoxically – say that the significance of his paper lies in the fact that it goes beyond a merely "historical" approach by drawing on the tradition of the Chicago school, and that the framework he proposes raises questions not so much of "historical" versus "conventional approaches," but rather of a truly historical sociology of the social sciences.

In the first part Chapoulie recalls some of the biases of "conventional" histories, and explains their persistence by invoking the "proximity" of the researchers to their object of study. For a proper understanding of the conventional histories and how these have evolved, this "proximity" and "familiarity" is not quite sufficient. If we try – however briefly and schematically – to historicize the production of histories of the social sciences, one could say that the conventional "histories" fulfilled

two distinct functions, one *programmatic*, the other *pedagogical*. The initial outlines of the history of sociology, for example, were an integral part of the debates about the status and strategy of the discipline. Reflecting on past achievements served the elaboration of actual projects. In precisely this sense Comte wrote extensively about his predecessors, their insights and errors, and the historical direction he detected in their writings. Emile Durkheim's writings on the history of the discipline followed a similar logic. For both men the historical or quasi-historical narratives they produced were part of the construction of their own intellectual programmes. Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* [Parsons 1937] is probably the canonical example in sociology of a historical reconstruction with the purpose of actually building a new theoretical program. It is worth noting that Paul Lazarsfeld's attempts to stimulate work on the history of social research, to which Chapoulie refers, had a similar objective: by uncovering a "dignified intellectual pedigree" of empirical research, he intended to strengthen its academic position [Lazarsfeld 1972, viii]. Much work on the history of the social sciences is in this sense a function of present concerns and a recurrent dimension of major debates in the social sciences.

When a certain degree of academic institutionalization of the social sciences was secured, a second type of historical writings appeared. The social sciences now had to be taught as well, and a common way to do so is by presenting pedagogical overviews of the highlights of the disciplinary history. Contrary to the first type of historical narrative, pedagogical accounts tend to refrain from making strong claims and generally take a non-controversial stance. Chronologically organized overviews of the main figures and the most prominent schools of thought are the standard here. So "conventional history" comes in at least two different forms, which owe their existence to two, quite distinct practices.

Following the rapid expansion of social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s and the university crisis of the years around 1968, the dominant paradigms in the various social science disciplines were vividly contested, and so were their historical accounts. The newer histories of the social sciences became more critical, more reflective, profiting from new work of a variety of authors in different disciplines (from Thomas Kuhn and Quentin Skinner to George Stocking and Alvin Gouldner), while simultaneously becoming something of a research specialty in their own right. The considerable amount of scholarly work that appeared since has varied in many respects, but it generally shares a historicist posture, demanding more thorough historical scholarship and opposing the older histories for their lack of actual historical research, their anachronisms and their presentism. Much of this work, it seems to me, has already realized the "historical approach" Chapoulie calls for. Intellectually, this battle has already been won (in spite of the fact that theorists will continue to use intellectual

history as they see fit, as will those who teach the history of the social sciences to their students).

More important in Chapoulie's proposal, therefore, are his suggestions to mobilize Everett Hughes and his Chicago companions to understand the work social scientists do. As he has demonstrated in his own research on sociology in France and the Chicago school, this is the most significant and, indeed, most timely part of his paper. Chapoulie outlines a broad approach, focussed on the work social scientists actually do, and contrary to the micro approaches that dominate "social studies of science," he does not want to ignore the broader conditions under which this work is carried out (insisting, for example, on the role of "sponsors" and "publics"). In order to conceptualize this broader context, Chapoulie refers to Hughes' notion of a "system of interaction," but however useful that concept may be, it does leave many properly sociological questions open. One of the more critical issues today is how we can actually understand local interactions and their outcomes, while incorporating the structural conditions under which local dynamics emerge, develop or, on the contrary, disperse and disintegrate. Here Chapoulie's outline would profit from a more sustained dialogue in particular with Bourdieu's field approach [see Bourdieu 2001] and Richard Whitley's work [Whitley 1984], which are among the most elaborate sociological models in this respect.

If the most interesting issues with which research on the development of the social sciences is confronted today are not so much issues of historical accuracy and detail, but rather of sociological analysis, historical studies of the social sciences are best incorporated in the broader domain of historical sociology. A fine example of such a reconceptualization is Marion Fourcade's recent book *Economists and Societies: Discipline and Profession in the United States, Britain and France 1890s to 1990s* [Fourcade 2009]. While obviously about the history of economics and economists, it deliberately employs a broad and explicitly sociological framework. It demonstrates that in addition to primarily historically and source-oriented work, a systematic historical sociological framework sharpens the analytical focus of the work, broadens the scope of the questions asked, and can perhaps, more generally, contribute to a more reflexive social science.

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Abstract: Critical against conventional disciplinary history of social science, this essay presents an analytical framework stemming from historical research of the author on Chicago sociology and french sociology after 1945. The proposed point of departure for research in the history of social sciences is similar to the basic perspective of history (as proposed by Lucien Febvre) or sociology of work in Everett Hughes' style: social sciences are to be considered as social practices whose primary ends are the production of texts, with historical and thus changing properties. Investigations must look at every categories concerned directly or indirectly (or even in abstentia) with the production of social sciences: researcher, concurrent researcher of other specialties or disciplines, scholarly and learned institutions, those who finance research, general audiences, etc.). Heterogeneous elements must be taken into account: the documentary sources, the way of processing documentation, the rhetoric, the categories of analyses and questioning, the social contexts in which the research is carried out, the biographical experience of producers, the contexts of publication and reception. As an illustration of the possible extensions of this approach, a rapid presentation is given of the use made in research on the Chicago tradition of certain distinctions to analyze the diffusion of works and the relations between generations of researchers.

Keywords: history of sociology, historical sociology.

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