Brown University

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Toward a New Comprehensive Social Science

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Annals of the International Institute of Sociology (IIS)

Its foundation in 1893 the International Institute of Sociology (IIS) has played an important and at times crucial role in the international world of social science. It was created as a forum for discussions among scholars whom we now think of as the classics of sociology and social science. Among its members and associates were some of the most noted scholars such as Franz Boas, Roger Bastide, Lujo Brentano, Theodor Geiger, Émile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim, William F. Ogburn, Pitirim Sorokin, Georg Simmel, Daniel De Sombert, Ludwig Stein, Gabriel Tarde, Richard Thurnwald, Ferdinand Toennies, Veblen, Charles Tilly, Sidney Webb, Max Weber, Karl von Wiese and Florian Znaniecki. They shared a sense of urgency about social problems but also a conviction that systematic inquiry would make human beings better able to grasp and overcome them. They also shared a belief that scholars from different nationalities and different theoretical traditions can form an international council and engage in intellectual contestation and dialogue while remaining respectful of other's diversity. This is reflected in the publications of the Institute, the most notable being the Annals. The first volume of the Annals was published already in 1901. In recent years the IIS has increasingly come to play a role analogous to that of the early years. The congresses preceding the one in Stockholm in 2005 were held in Seoul (2004), Krakow (2001), Tel Aviv (1999), Köln (1997), Trieste (1995), Paris (1993) and Rome (1991). They have highlighted dilemmas of human societies and societal institutions amidst processes of globalization, cooperation and conflict. They have done so in the spirit which guided the formation of the IIS and the Annals. The IIS is an engagement and encounter between a variety of theoretical traditions among members of a truly international community of scholars.

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Frontiers of Sociology

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INTRODUCTION: FRONTIERS OF SOCIOLOGY

Peter Hedström and Björn Wittrock

Since its foundation in 1893 the International Institute of Sociology (IIS) has played an important and at times crucial role in the international world of social science. The IIS was created as a forum for discussions among scholars whom we now think of as classics of sociology and social science. They shared a sense of urgency about social conditions but also a conviction that systematic inquiry would make human beings more able to grasp and overcome them. They also shared a belief that scholars from different nations and different theoretical traditions can form an international community and engage in intellectual contestation and dialogue while remaining respectful of each other’s diversity.

In recent years the IIS has increasingly come to play a role analogous to that of its early years. World Congresses of the IIS have highlighted dilemmas of human existence and societal institutions amidst processes of globalization, cooperation and violent conflict. They have done so in the spirit which guided the formation of the IIS, namely that of an engagement and encounter between a variety of theoretical positions among members of a truly international community of scholars.

There may be a greater urgency today than for a very long time for sociology to examine its own intellectual and institutional frontiers relative to other disciplinary and scholarly programs but also relative to a rapidly changing institutional and academic landscape. In this sense, current sociology may be in a situation more analogous to that of the classics of sociology and of the IIS than has been the case for a large part of the twentieth century.

The 37th World Congress of the IIS focused on theory and research at the forefront of sociology and on the relationship between sociology and its neighboring disciplines. This volume constitutes a sustained effort by prominent sociologists and other social scientists to assess the current standing of sociology. It is a stocktaking of the unique nature of sociology in the light of advances within the discipline itself and within a range of neighboring disciplines. Some of the chapters outline institutional and professional strategies for sociology in the new millennium. Others trace scholarly advances and propose ambitious research
TOWARD A NEW COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Dietrich Rueschemeyer

If I speak about the “frontier of sociology” that separates the field from and links it to political science, I should make clear from the start that it is precisely this borderland where my own work—as well as the work of colleagues and friends with whom I share many research interests—is located. As will become apparent, this location informs my view of the present state and the prospects of the two fields.

In order to establish a perspective within which I can say something meaningful about these two vast enterprises in a brief talk, I first look back a hundred years. At that time, an institutionally oriented, comprehensive social science responded to an increasingly self-limiting field of economics that proved unable to respond meaningfully to the social and economic transformations—and the disruptions—of the industrial revolution (Wagner 1990). This comprehensive social science was what we now call classic sociology, the origin of modern sociology.

From Comprehensive Social Science to Specialized Disciplines

Political science had evolved—in Germany as well as in other continental countries—earlier than sociology. Under different designations, it developed in conjunction with the rise of the modern state. The German Staatswissenschaften became one of the foundations on which at the end of the nineteenth century the new social science could build.

In the United States, political science responded to the emergence of a state with rapidly expanding operations. It focused on the tension between efficient governance and individual autonomy (Katznelson and Milner 2002). This American version of political science, inspired by the ethos of a non-partisan liberalism, was better able to retain a fundamental stability during the next generations than the historical social science represented by classic sociology. The social science of Max Weber, building on the dramatic accomplishments of modern history during the nineteenth century and embracing the analysis of government and law as well as of religion, community, and political economy—that social science was lost.
The comprehensive social science of the turn of the century turned into a number of specialized fields. Sociology, Political Science, and Ethnology/Anthropology were now separated from History as well as from the pioneer of disciplinary specialization in the study of social life, neo-classical Economics. Why did the multifaceted social science inquiry not prosper? There were, first, the imperatives of competitive institutionalization in the national university systems. These became powerful factors in the twentieth century. There were also complex intellectual reasons to which I will return. And a third causal condition, if I may hazard a historical guess, seems to have been that after the First World War politics preempted the interpretation of historical developments and crises. That made a “value-free” conception of social inquiry welcome to many.

Intellectually, the deepest divisions revolve around the role of model building with radical assumptions, theoretical generalization, and historical particularity. These concerns cemented—and continue to reinforce—the boundaries separating economics from the more institutionally oriented disciplines of Sociology, Political Science, and Anthropology and those boundaries that set History off from the fields more strongly defined by theoretical ambition.

I will argue that it is time to give another chance to an integrated social science. In fact this return is well under way. It can build on methodological and theoretical gains in actual research. The most promising developments are taking place in Political Science and Sociology, though they find partners in Economics and History. It is even possible to claim that such a return responds to a critical historical conjuncture of similar magnitude and urgency as the constellation that formed the background condition of the comprehensive social science conceptions represented by Pareto and Weber.

Learning from Political Science

Let me preface that argument with a few comparative observations about Political Science and Sociology and with some suggestions for change in Sociology. I will not be able to justify them in any detail. But the issues, if not my arguments, will be familiar to most social scientists.

Less bound to conventional ideas than Political Science, Sociology has explored methodological and theoretical issues more widely. Ranging from small group research through large surveys on many issues to societal system theory, it has been a proving ground for painstaking method development as well as attempts to grasp complex interdependencies through qualitative work, for big theoretical ambitions as well as the confrontations between alternative general theories. And both in methods and in theory Sociology has exerted significant influence on Political Science in the past.

I see two features that Sociology could and should adopt to its advantage from the way Political Science is currently institutionalized: the continued concern with normative theory, and the insistence on cross-national comparative research.

The first of these seems to run against the ideal of a value-free social science. Yet social thought radically “free” of values has been shown to be impossible. What is possible is to differentiate value judgments and their justifications from empirical judgments of what is the case and how things work. The insistence on a value-free social science has not rid us of blatantly ideological arguments parading as empirical judgments. Nor is political science significantly more plagued by such ideological orientations than sociology, in spite of the fact that “political theory” consists largely of a history of normative ideas from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill and current discussions about justice and community. To institutionalize in Sociology the consideration of alternative theories of “good societies”—the theories of, say, Habermas, Nozick, Rawls, and Sandel, with or without a complement from the history of social thought—would define large empirical problems of possibility, impossibility, and trade-off. At the same time, it would—as a clearly differentiated discourse—limit the commingling of empirical theory and ideology, if for no other reason than that it clearly identifies different value positions and the associated fusions of empirical postulates and value claims (otherwise known as ideologies).

Sociology also can and should learn from the fact that comparative politics is a pursuit that any respectable Political Science department is obliged to cultivate. Strangely enough, the standard program of Sociology gives macro-comparative work a much weaker priority. Sociologists tend to be preoccupied with issues pertaining to their own country, while macro-analysis rarely examines real countries other than one’s own. Instead, Sociology proceeds too easily to arguments about “societies” in general. It is not that Sociology lacks macro-comparative studies; there are many and excellent ones. But the discipline as a whole does
not demand realistic comparative macro-analysis as a steady pursuit and obligation in every self-respecting department.

The argument for institutionalizing macro-comparative research more strongly in Sociology is not unrelated to the first suggestion. Macro-comparative analysis can elucidate the range of variations across countries on issues relevant for the discussion of good societies. It can give clues about what is possible under specifiable conditions, what is impossible, and which trade-offs are likely between different desirable features.

Giving macro-comparative sociology greater emphasis is, of course, also closely related to my main theme, the return to a comprehensive social science as an emergent development and a major undertaking in the coming decades. Macro-comparative work that deals with such issues as state building, revolutions, the conditions of democracy, policies of social provision, or contrasts and transformations in gender relations cannot come to valid conclusions if it neglects power relations, law and other political and social institutions, cultural templates, economic conditions and developments, historical continuities and so on.

Toward a New Comprehensive Social Science

Advocating a return to a comprehensive social science, I will briefly indicate four arguments—that it has been partially realized, why it faces now less intellectual problems than a century ago, why it is important, and how it responds to a historical conjuncture that presents problems of similar complexity and urgency as the historical situation around the past turn of the century.

*A new comprehensive social science has been partially realized.* The problems of international development and the transformation of the command economies of Communist countries are similar in character to the issues faced by the early, undifferentiated political economy that dealt with the early and partial emergence of capitalism. The narrowing of economic analysis that came with the establishment of an institutional framework for capitalism in western Europe and its global offshoots is now giving way to a renewed appreciation of the institutional conditions of economic growth. This brings economic analysis closer to political economy work in political science and sociology.

The other major dividing line, defined by the tension between historical particularity and theoretical generalization, also has been crossed in ways few would have anticipated fifty years ago. Comparative historical work in the social sciences has made great strides with trans-disciplinary work on revolutions, democratization, and welfare state policies, to name just a few broad areas (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003).

There is no question that the overall institutionalization of separate social science disciplines is here to stay, if not necessarily in unchanged fashion. The return to a comprehensive social science is and will most likely remain a partial return rather than a wholesale transformation of all the social science disciplines. But it seems a safe bet that it is here to stay and that it will make influential contributions.

*A new comprehensive social science now faces less intellectual obstacles than a century ago.* The development of overlapping research interests in the relations between Economics as well as History and the other social science disciplines has resulted in a sharing of analytic tools across the major dividing lines. One paradigmatic instance of this is the simultaneous emergence of institutionalism in economics, rational action theory, comparative history as well as in organizational and cultural studies in sociology (North 1990, Hall and Taylor 1996, Katznelson and Weingast 2005). Other examples are new analytic tools to deal with history in political analysis (Pierson 2004) and the florescence of economic sociology. The contrasts in the mode of analysis that separated economics and history from the other social sciences are weakening.

It is true that these developments are driven by theoretical ambitions that remain to a great extent unfulfilled. Yet if exemplars of what textbooks might recognize as full-fledged empirical theories are rare, there have been significant advances in focused theory frames that often come as interlinked and nested sets (Rueschemeyer, forthcoming). There also have been significant advances in research methods, for instance in comparative historical work where what a century ago could be attained only by genius now seems open to the cooperative work of yeomen.

The new developments do not constitute forms of intellectual imperialism (even though one volume advocating rational choice modeling adopted that label). What is happening in reality is just regular border crossing and much closer cooperation, so regular and close that the borders lose their significance.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Comte's sociology was conceived in imperialist terms; and the critique of economics around the turn of the last century also had an imperialist cast. Rational action theory sometimes presents itself as "economic imperialism", but it has been indigenized in Political Science and Sociology with major modifications. Neither Political Science nor
Why is the new comprehensive social science important? The simple answer is that tackling social and political problems requires comprehensive answers because their causal conditions are multi-faceted. The same can be said about many important questions that are not directly inspired by pragmatic issues for instance questions about the sources of revolutions. The answers that social science has to offer often may remain incomplete and fail to present ready-made solutions; one frequent reason is that an answer is found in long-term developments that are beyond the leverage and/or the time horizon of politics. Even if this is the case, multi-faceted assessments by social scientists do not leave the diagnoses to the purveyors of ideological shortcuts. In addition, putting Humpty Dumpty together again, beginning to integrate insights of the specialized disciplines, is an intellectual challenge that is unreasonably left to post-adolescent undergraduates unless it is also made a scholarly task.

Does the new comprehensive social science respond to a historical conjuncture that presents problems of similar complexity and urgency as the historical situation around the past turn of the century? It is fundamentally the old problems writ large: extreme forms of poverty and inequality; coexistence of rich and poor nations; weak and ineffective institutions related to growth and distribution; a growing disconnect between inherited cultural templates and current developments; and, arising out of these, the chance of brutal domestic and international conflicts.

There is a possibility that what a social science has to offer against this background will again be preempted by politics and simple ideological thrusts as was the case between 1914 and 1945. What we have to say has to compete with religious beliefs and their derivations—some radicalized, some uncertainly searching for new orientations—but also with a politically powered market fundamentalism and with simplistic appeals to freedom as an all-purpose remedy.

Sociology ever had the standing to launch an imperialist enterprise. An anecdote from the history of my department at Brown University illustrates this: When a senior professor of sociology in the late 1800s claimed in Comtean fashion that as the representative of the “queen of all disciplines” he should have a say in all major appointments, the university decided to discontinue Sociology.

References