

History and the social sciences

The study of history has traditionally been regarded as valuable because of its intrinsic interest in unique historical phenomena.¹ This has been contrasted with the social sciences where it appears greater emphasis is placed on empiricism, quantification and the use of theoretical models. Historians have tended to focus much less on social groups, social structures or patterns in human behaviour or events than those who work in the social sciences. Some historians believe that social scientists simplify reality by using trends (based on the study or observation of a number of events) to explain any specific event. The question is how different the study of history is in practice from research work in the social sciences.

A basic distinction is often made between the use of generalisations by historians and social scientists. Historians employ generalisations to assist our understanding of specific past events, whereas social scientists use them to explain mainly current events and offer reliable indicators about future events. Although historians and social scientists both use generalisations, they view the significance of general concepts from a different perspective. Chronology plays an important part in the explanation of a sequence of historical events, whereas social scientists tend to focus on patterns and trends. The contrasts which were believed to exist between historians and social scientists is clearly illustrated in the following statement, originally made by Alan Bullock in 1951, on what the proper role of the historian should be:

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His whole training teaches him to break down rather than build up generalisations, to bring the general always to the touchstone of particular, concrete instances. His experience of this discipline and its results makes him cautious and sceptical about the possibility of establishing uniformities and regularities of sufficient generality to bear the weight of the conclusions then built up on them.²

We need to look at the distinguishing features of the social science disciplines and how they differ from the discipline of history.

During the nineteenth century, historians almost exclusively focused their attention on political history because this was where most of the documentary evidence was available. It was only towards the end of that century that some historians began to shift their focus from political and constitutional history to a consideration of social and economic history. The latter placed more emphasis on the lives of ordinary people and of mass movements, rather than that of politicians, statesmen, landowners, military leaders or entrepreneurs. This shift of focus subsequently broadened the range of historical topics under investigation to encompass local history, family history, women's history, cultural history, labour history, urban history and the history of crime and punishment. The social sciences could still be distinguished from historical research because considerably less emphasis was placed on a study of individuals and much more on social and economic structures, functional relationships and social theories. History was expected to combine narrative and analysis: narrative offered the details of actual events, whereas analysis placed those events in a broader social, economic or political context. The social science disciplines did suggest promising new areas of historical enquiry, as in psycho-history where psychology was applied to assist our understanding of the psychological motives of political and military leaders during periods of international tension or the psychological bases of popular protest.

A basic contrast has always been seen to exist between historical narrative and theoretical models in the social sciences.³ Some social scientists believed that traditional historical narrative provided little more than a descriptive account of the past with insufficient analytical content. The greater emphasis on quantitative data in the social sciences did require the construction of abstract models; and in sociology the belief that society progresses through stages of development did favour the use of

abstract concepts. The search for patterns in social development, organisations and in human behaviour naturally favoured the use of models or concepts. The latter help to explain a range of social phenomena which have certain features in common. Historians also use concepts, such as 'class', when they seek to generalise about particular features of society. But perhaps there is something fundamentally different in the language used by historians and that used by social scientists: the latter appear to use obscure language much more than would be expected by historians. More importantly, there are differences in how concepts and theories are used to explain past events. For example, sociologists think about social structures and use theories to assist their assessment of social reality. In his book entitled *Historical Sociology* Philip Abrams stated: 'Social reality stands behind social appearances not in the relation of face to veil but in the relation of process to moment. Its apprehension is more a matter of analytical structuring than of empirical seeing through.'⁴ Some historians might claim that this was not the only, or even the most important, route to our understanding of the past. They could argue that abstract models may be at variance with the surviving record of the past or the memory of individuals who lived through past events.

There are differences of approach between history and the social sciences, although this may not necessarily indicate that the social sciences are closer to the natural sciences than they are to history. It is frequently stated that history is more of an art than a science, that it has a closer affinity with literary traditions and that the art of writing and the use of imagination are more important in historical research than the method of investigation. If the social sciences share similarities with the natural sciences they would need to be capable of formulating laws about society which could predict human behaviour. But there was to be no science of society. The natural sciences did not provide appropriate models for work in the humanities and social sciences. Social scientists and historians share a belief in the need to explain the significance of events, and not merely describe them. For example, a scientist may use anatomical terminology to describe human movements, whereas a social scientist would seek to explain the meaning and significance of those movements, such as that the clapping of hands is used to express approval or enjoyment. Perhaps it is in the formulation of theories and the use of quantitative techniques

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that the social sciences were regarded as bearing some resemblance to the natural sciences. The scope for quantitative studies and use of theory is less evident in historical studies than it is in the social sciences.

The social sciences adopted a rigorous mode of investigation and attempted to be scientific, partly in order to gain greater recognition. However, unlike the natural sciences, the social sciences do not provide us with general laws which we can use to predict events. For example, if the price of commodities increases then there is a greater likelihood that their consumption will fall, but this is not equivalent to saying that there is a general law which states that if the price increases by 20 per cent then consumption will fall by 15 per cent. Indeed, an increase in the price of a scarce or prestige commodity may serve to increase, rather than lower, demand for it. We are therefore observing the operation of probabilities, not absolute measurements, because human nature is too unpredictable to permit this. In any case, we can state that if individuals are aware that it is predicted they will act a particular way, then they may choose to act differently. The social sciences do appear to differ from history to the extent that much of the work of social scientists generates results which may be of more obvious current political, social or economic benefit. Social scientists also gain more direct access to individuals, such as through interviews and participant observation, whereas historians rely primarily on documentary evidence. The accumulation of historical and social scientific evidence does advance our knowledge of society, but not in such an obvious cumulative manner as it appears to do in the natural sciences. In science, many new studies or theories have to be built upon the foundations of earlier studies to a greater extent than they do in historical or social scientific studies. New ideas, evidence and techniques will function as useful, but not essential, building blocks for later historical studies. It has been said that this suggests that history is related more closely to literary than to scientific studies.⁵

The social sciences may claim to be closer to the natural sciences but the extent to which they are has been questioned. In arguing against the belief that the social sciences could provide a scientific explanation of social life, Alan Ryan stated: 'Many explanations look rather dubiously causal, many seem not to be backed by generalisations, much explanation seems very localised in its range, value-freedom seems extremely

difficult to attain, and it seems equally hard to attain the degree of agreement on the meaning and interpretation of the data that natural scientists regularly achieve.⁶ There is perhaps another aspect which would indicate that history and the social sciences have more in common with each other than they do with the natural sciences: this is in the relationship between cause and effect. In the natural world causes always precede effects but in the social world actions do not always follow preceding thoughts because humans have the ability to envisage the possible results of certain actions and so avoid them. Social science appears to straddle the divide between history and the natural sciences because it makes use of the content of history and the methods of the natural sciences. The social sciences may be unable to offer a science of society but the work of social scientists can provide valuable material for historians.

Historians benefit from the research output of the social science disciplines, but history also plays a significant role in the content of the social sciences. Social scientists cannot always focus exclusively on contemporary social structures without considering the historical background of the subjects they investigate. A society cannot be fully understood unless it is viewed in its historical context.⁷ The strength of explanations in the social sciences is bolstered through a recognition of the interplay between unique events, which are often studied by historians, and general patterns evident in the functioning of societies. As Sidney Pollard one remarked, 'history takes in all of man's social activities, including his beliefs and superstitions, his science and knowledge, his political organisation, personal eccentricities and artistic achievements. All these act and react on the material and class-oriented bases of life.'⁸ The study of history does have a role to play in our understanding of contemporary events, which are the preoccupation of social scientists. Hugh Trevor-Roper stressed the importance of taking account of the historical perspective when he stated in a journal article on history and sociology that 'so much of our own contemporary history is hidden from us that we cannot hope to see it in full. It is so close to us that we cannot see it in correct proportion. It is not yet over, so that we cannot judge it by the result. Familiarity with the past can supply some of those defects. It can provide a standard of comparison'.⁹

The ability of history to provide knowledge of unique events, individuals and a chronological framework, counterbalances the emphasis within

the social sciences on impersonal factors and structures, such as in the examination of economic and social trends. Alan Bullock summed this up in a lecture delivered in 1976 when he argued as follows:

the context will be incomplete and produce a misleading picture of the past if it is confined to the description and analysis of only economic and social factors and if it excludes political history, the impact and chronological order of events frequently unpredictable in their combination and effects, the interplay of personalities, the conflicts of particular interests, the mixture of rational and irrational behaviour, the element of chance.¹⁰

The study of history does have a role to play in supplementing the work of social scientists, and the social sciences have in turn had an influence on the work of historians. This influence may be said to be evident in the search for precision in data through data analysis, in the range of questions based on source material, and in the need to look for general patterns in historical data. Some historians have been more willing than others to acknowledge the usefulness of the social sciences in helping us to explain the nature of historical development.

The social sciences have alerted historians to the need to move beyond an assessment of the role of individuals to consider wider social factors, such as social status, class and social mobility, which may influence human behaviour. E.H. Carr argued that proper history could not be written unless an attempt was made to study individuals in relation to their social environment. In particular contexts, class, status or nationality may exert a much greater influence on human behaviour than individual personality does. In any case, individuals act according to hidden as well as conscious motives, and their actions may be the product of unforeseen as well as planned forces or beliefs. By looking at individuals within a wider social context it is possible for historians to provide a more meaningful account of the factors which influenced the course of past events. This is particularly important when we consider that most events in history have been influenced by individuals acting within a group, occupation or class. A history which merely describes individual actions to the exclusion of the wider social context within which those actions occurred (i.e. roles, institutions and social structures) is not a complete history. E.H. Carr remarked that to write history as the product of the actions of Great Men without taking account of social forces, was to erroneously place Great

Men outside history and regard them as imposing their will on history.¹¹ His view was that Great Men should be regarded as both the products and agents of historical development: outstanding individuals who shaped, but were also shaped by, social forces.

The contrast between history and the social sciences involves more than simply a contrast of subject matter. The techniques used in the social sciences differ from those used in most historical research. Some historians have used social science techniques to open up new lines of enquiry, such as in the use of quantitative techniques to test the validity of qualitative evidence. This has sometimes provided a reservoir of new and fruitful source material for historians. However, there are still differences in the research techniques of historians and social scientists. Social scientists use questionnaires, sampling, interviews, participant observation, comparative methods, theoretical models, mainframe computers and statistical analysis of data. They are willing to use quantitative methods or construct mathematical models, whereas historians are more likely to rely on the critical examination of documentary evidence. This is understandable because most of the techniques used in the social sciences are not directly applicable to the study of past events. For example, oral history may be useful if we wish to fill gaps in the historical record by examining contemporary events within living memory, but it is obviously not an option for those historians whose field of study pre-dates the twentieth century. Similarly, participant observation is only an appropriate method for studies which focus on the role of individuals in the present, not human behaviour in the past. The adoption of a scientific approach by some social scientists created a division between the social sciences and the discipline of history, such as in the use of statistical analysis and theoretical models.

The precision of statistical analysis for social scientists was just as important as the reliability of documentary evidence for historians. Information presented in statistical tables gave the impression of being more precise than historical narrative, but historians argued that it was the selection and interpretation of data which were the crucial factors. Moreover, historians could argue that the presentation of statistical data might give a distorted image of reality if the data focused only on factors which regularly occurred and could be quantified, thereby omitting unexpected and accidental events. Similarly, some historians believed that the social

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sciences placed too much emphasis on theoretical models. It seemed that social scientists used facts to support their theories, whereas historians were more interested in only using theories if they supported specific facts. We instinctively associate theories with the social and natural sciences, and less so with the discipline of history. But can theories be developed within the discipline of history to assist us in the explanation of historical change? Is it in fact possible to provide an accurate analysis of the stages of industrial development, the class structure or the factors conducive to the emergence of dictatorships by using theory? Historians do construct a number of hypotheses when they seek to make sense of the complexity of historical events, but theories do not seem to play such an important role in historical studies because new evidence may emerge to undermine any grand theory. Indeed, a common feature of historical work in some areas is the multiplicity of competing hypotheses. Theory does not play a vital role in historical research because it de-emphasises the uniqueness of past events, as well as the role of individuals who helped to shape those events. Theory tends to portray individuals as helpless in the face of historical events beyond their comprehension or ability to modify. The use of grand theories would force historians to opt for a deterministic model of historical change. Nevertheless, if history consisted merely of a number of unique events, it would make the course of history much less comprehensible. So perhaps theory does have some role to play in helping us to understand and explain historical change.

Historians are cautious about the ability of models to provide a genuinely objective route to discovering the reality of past events. Even within the social sciences there are rival theories and models. Problems can occur when a subject is investigated from the perspective of a single theory. This is the type of criticism which has been levelled at, for example, Marxism because of its exclusive emphasis on the concept of class, to the exclusion of other divisions in society (e.g. ethnicity, nationality or religion). The existence of conflicting theories indicates that theory does not play a value-free role in explaining historical change. A more fruitful approach appeared to exist in the use of mathematical models to explain specific historical developments.

In the postwar period there has been a developing interest in the use of quantitative methods in historical research, particularly in the field

of economic and social history where one social scientific method had an obvious application. The use of quantitative studies was regarded as especially useful for examining large-scale events, particularly where data existed which had been gathered over long periods of time. Examples included demographic studies using census data or perhaps an examination of price movements. It was in areas such as these that mathematical models were constructed to assist our understanding of historical change. Statements which were based on the use of quantitative data appeared more reliable and assumed a higher status than qualitative statements. Yet these techniques were unable to produce valuable results unless all the significant variables had been identified. Studies which were based only on the evidence which was available and able to be quantified were always likely to produce an incomplete and distorted account of reality. Moreover, the statistical data still had to be interpreted to make sense of it. For example, the number of products sold of specific commodities in the past may reveal little about their popularity unless analysis is extended to include other variables, such as competing commodities, prices, consumer preferences and traditions. Also, factual errors could produce a wholly inaccurate and misleading account of historical events. Historians realised that they needed to have a good grasp of the historical context before they could reach any conclusions based on quantitative data. As John Tosh indicates, 'statistics may serve to reveal or clarify a particular tendency; but how we *interpret* that tendency – the significance we attach to it and the causes we adduce for it – is a matter for seasoned historical judgement, in which the historian trained exclusively in quantitative methods would be woefully deficient.'¹²

It seems that there was only limited scope for the use of quantitative methods in history, except perhaps in areas where data were too numerous and too complex to manipulate manually.¹³ But quantitative methods do force us to ask new questions, to examine new themes, to focus on old issues from a new perspective and to abandon outdated beliefs. However, if any historical research problem is not carefully defined, computers may generate so much data that its relevance may be difficult to ascertain.¹⁴ Moreover, no proper historical account can be written unless the non-quantifiable aspects are also included in the equation. Arthur Marwick drew attention to some limitations in the scope of computers in historical

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research when he stated: 'Where many kinds of often fragmentary information are accumulated from a vast range of different kinds of archives there will be little possibility of the rational compilation of a database. Where issues of perception, mental attitudes, quality of life, rather than quantities, are being investigated, then the computer will remain on the sidelines.'¹⁵ Perhaps a useful way of assessing the scope as well as the limitations of quantitative studies is to consider the work of the new economic historians.

By the beginning of the 1960s, American historians were using mathematical models to solve historical problems. The application of these models to the study of economic history formed the basis of what was to be known as the new economic history, sometimes referred to as econometric history or cliometrics. The new economic historians were so enthusiastic about quantitative methods that they used statistical data as the primary basis of their historical analysis, not merely for illustrative purposes to support existing arguments. One of the first major topics covered was the effect of slavery in constraining economic and technological development in the American South prior to the commencement of the Civil War. Quantitative studies suggested that the South was not as economically backward, nor the plantation system as unprofitable as originally envisaged, under the institution of slavery. The new economic historians therefore stated that the case for the abolition of slavery could not rest solely on the economic argument that slavery retarded economic growth, but instead had to be based on the moral argument as to whether it was humane to maintain slavery. Not all historians have accepted these results without some qualification.¹⁶ Nevertheless, what early quantitative studies did achieve was to force scholars to reinterpret previous assumptions about specific historical events.

Another example is provided by the American historian Robert Fogel who examined the social benefits of railroads and their role in stimulating American economic growth. Fogel compared the actual level of national income with a hypothetical level which would have been reached in the absence of railroads. He wished to ascertain whether the social saving brought about by railroads was as significant as most historians believed it was. The social saving was calculated by comparing the actual cost of shipping goods by rail, with the hypothetical cost of transporting goods

in the absence of railroads. The calculations were complex because of the large number of variables involved, as follows: possible economies generated by altering production and marketing sites if canals and roads alone were expected to transport commodities; costs associated with the slower transportation of goods by road and canal; inability to use canals during the winter months; an assessment of the area of land under cultivation, including changes in food prices, food consumption and land values; the proximity of farms to navigable waterways; and finally, possible damage or loss of goods if railroad transport was not available. Taking all these factors into account, Fogel argued that railroads did *not* bring about a revolutionary impact on economic growth.

In the absence of railroads, Robert Fogel argued that improvements to the canals and roads would have taken place, thereby lowering transportation costs and reducing the social savings brought about by the railroads. The controversy generated by this counterfactual model was based on the fact that it involved guessing the actions of individuals if a given sequence of events had occurred. The model tried to simplify reality so that comparisons could be made between what *did* happen in the past, with what *might* have happened if specified conditions had been different. But was there sufficient evidence available to test the reliability of the model? The real difficulty with the counterfactual model was that because the hypothetical circumstances did not occur, there was no conclusive evidence to support the validity of the assumptions made about them. Moreover, many historians disliked the use of mathematical equations and statistical sampling. In any case, the advocates of quantitative methods accepted that the discipline of history was unlikely to be transformed into a social science, even if it did make use of 'scientific' techniques.¹⁷

Many historians regard history as an art, not a science. Yet many historical studies appear to be closer to the social sciences, both in their subject matter and in the techniques which they use. Historians now adopt an increasingly rigorous approach in relation to their source material. For example, scientific methods may be used to date documents, to compare handwriting or to provide clear visual images of old photographs; and statistical methods are used in the analysis of demographic or electoral studies. History is also an art: the art of reconstructing the past from the documentary and other evidence available, using critical

and imaginative skills. The true art of the historian's work becomes evident when the macro and micro elements, the broad picture and the historical detail, appear in proper conjunction. The study of history is the art of looking at the evidence of the past to produce an account of events which will take note of the motives of individuals, the role of wider social influences, and the interplay of chance. The purpose of historical research is to make sense of a series of events in a specified timeframe, establish their authenticity, understand the connection between them, and interpret their wider significance. Historians formulate hypotheses but do not establish general laws or models of historical development. The study of history combines elements of the foreseen and the unpredictable, individual actions and wider social forces. It appears to be more of an art than a social science.

Notes

- 1 Alan Bullock, 'Has history ceased to be relevant?', *The Historian*, no. 43 (Autumn 1994), 20.
- 2 Alan Bullock, 'The historian's purpose: history and metahistory', *History Today*, 29 (1979), 713.
- 3 Peter Burke, *Sociology and History* (London, 1992) ch. 1.
- 4 Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet, 1982) p. 317.
- 5 Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History* (London, 1970) p. 370.
- 6 Alan Ryan, 'Is the study of society a science?', in David Potter *et al.* (eds), *Society and the Social Sciences* (London, 1981) pp. 20–1.
- 7 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, 1959) pp. 149–50.
- 8 Sidney Pollard, 'Economic history – a science of society?', *Past and Present*, no. 30 (April 1965), 12.
- 9 H.R. Trevor-Roper, 'The past and the present: history and sociology', *Past and Present*, no. 42 (February 1969), 5.
- 10 Alan Bullock, 'Is history becoming a social science?: the case of contemporary history', *History Today*, 29 (1979), 765–6.
- 11 E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, 2nd edn (London, 1987) p. 54.
- 12 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 2nd edn (London, 1991) p. 197.
- 13 Daniel I. Greenstein, *A Historian's Guide to Computing* (Oxford, 1994) ch. 1.
- 14 Evan Mawdsley and Thomas Munck, *Computing for Historians: An Introductory Guide* (Manchester, 1993) ch. 1.
- 15 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke, 1989) p. 180.
- 16 Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London, 1987) pp. 32–3.
- 17 Robert William Fogel, 'The limits of quantitative methods in history', *American Historical Review*, 80 (1975), 329–50.