

Historiographic Schools

CHRISTOPHER LLOYD

The Concept of "Schools"

The present and past of historiography is often presented in the literature as a pattern of clusterings of writers and their key concepts into what have become known as "schools" or "traditions" or "discourses" or "networks," or "approaches" of thinking about how to write historiography. Within this literature these terms have appeared in a somewhat unexamined way. The complex relationships between history, philosophy, and historiography has, at least in many and various accounts by historians of historiography (such as Thompson 1942; Collingwood 1946; White 1973; Breisach 1983; Kelley 1991; Iggers 1997; Bentley 1997; Burns and Rayment-Pickard 2000), given rise over time to a dense, changing pattern of clusters of thought.

Clusters that are variously called "schools," "traditions," "discourses," "approaches," and "networks" of thought (hereafter all called "schools") seem to be ubiquitous in the history of ideas generally (not just historiography), at least as revealed by students of the history of ideas (cf. Collins 1998). That is, intellectuals apparently rarely have been isolated individuals without some sort of group affinity that situates and influences their thinking. Indeed, it's a truism that intellectual thought (indeed, all thought) always depends to a large degree upon prior and related contemporary thought. The history of thought is an *evolutionary* process. But it is a further step to argue that intellectual thinking more or less always occurs within "schools" of one sort or another. The reality, nature, and cohesiveness of "schools" as evidenced in the history of historiography is an open question, which is the topic of this chapter.

In the history and sociology of ideas there is, then, a (usually implicit) meta-claim that a pattern of clustering is the consequence of some sort of deep structure within critical and creative intellectual thought. There seems to be reason to think that the deep structure is one that necessarily produces a non-linear pattern over long periods. The pattern seems to be the consequence, at the deeper level, of the forms of affinity or disaffinity that thinkers and their ideas have with others and as such is an integral part of the structures of all social relatedness. That is, the history of ideas cannot be separated from the history of societies in both the senses of the mutual interconnectedness of intellectual and social relational structures and the historical processes that all such social structures undergo.

Therefore, the historiographic study of ideas is really the Historical Sociology (or Social History) of ideas or knowledge. This has been argued, at least, for some time, especially since the influence of Marx and Weber became strong in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and further extended by writers influenced by both of them, such as Karl Mannheim, Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, and Randall Collins through the twentieth century. The question for Mannheim was about the social conditions or causes of knowledge production. Later in the twentieth century, social epistemology diverged from this kind of work to ask a slightly different question: is knowledge to be understood individually or socially? That is, is all knowledge socially relative or somehow transcendent of all specific social contexts of its production? (Schmitt 1994: 1). Thomas Kuhn (1962) famously argued, influenced by older Quinean notions, for the power of paradigmatic frameworks of presuppositions within which thinking, theorization, and research always takes place. Kuhn's view was that there was a progressive transition between pre-science and sciences in certain fields as a consequence of revolutions in thought that bring about paradigmatic frameworks for knowledge. But his revolutions were of course premised by a history that made the revolutions possible. Imre Lakatos articulated a similar concept of progressive research programs as the hallmark of sciences as distinct from non-sciences (Lakatos 1970). Foucault's view seems to have been (at least at one time) that there are marked epistemic breaks between discourses and no history of development or evolution between them. The strong program in the sociology of knowledge in the 1970s and 1980s, associated with Barry Barnes (1974, 1982) and David Bloor (1976), argued for the social relativism of all knowledge and therefore for the social determination of the history of ideas. The constitution of schools of thought and the evolution of ideas, including revolutions in ideas, have to be traced, in this view, to the social relations of intellectuals and thinkers of all kinds. Karl Popper's argument, on the other hand, was for a semi-independent realm of thought that, somewhat akin to the Platonic concept of ideal forms, undergoes an evolutionary process of its own as an exosomatic form of human creativity and development (Popper 1972; cf. Fuller 1988, 2003).

Two main organizational principles or contentions seem to be central, then, in the literature on the history of historiography: first, that ideas and intellectuals have been and are clustered and this is a consequence of deep social and intellectual forces; second, that these clusters or intellectual constellations or schools have undergone a history. Not so obvious and not universally shared is a third contention, that the emergence of the modern physical, biological, and geological sciences from the late nineteenth century, in symbiosis with powerful technologies of scientific inquiry and engineering that enabled the capacity to uncover the hidden causative structures of the natural world, began a wholesale break from the "normal" history of ideas of all previous thought. Within this contention, the "mature" sciences, once they are "mature," are viewed as having dispensed with the chaotic non-linear history of "schoolization" and entered an altogether different trajectory of historical development. But even in the mature sciences there are forms of intellectual affiliation between scientists that are not entirely linear, not developed solely within empirical scientific research. That is, social networks and social power structures retain a degree of significance in the sciences but these networks and structures are not strongly determinant of the clusterings of affinity *à la* schools in scientific thought generally.

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To state it another way, schools are not a phenomenon of the history of sciences because certain fundamental philosophical issues and modes of reasoning are agreed upon, unlike in non-sciences. Disagreements in sciences are about detailed aspects of theory, research techniques, and significance of research results, and not about fundamental issues of philosophy. These disagreements do not arise from prior clusterings of scientists into schools. There is a research "community" within particular sciences unlike in the history of ideas in all non-science discourses. One of the hallmarks of science is the subjection of beliefs about the fundamental nature of being and knowledge to self-scrutiny. Of course, not all scientists do this as a matter of course and basic assumptions are widely taken for granted but such self-awareness of basic commitments is part of the fabric of science in a way that no other forms of discourse have. Ideally science has a bootstrap approach to establishing, criticizing, and building upon its own foundations. Those foundations do not come from some external discourse or authority (cf. Shapere 1984). The equivalent in historiographic inquiry would be for historians collectively to self-criticize their understandings of the nature of social relations, the nature of human thinking and motivation, the structure of human communication, and the nature of social evolution. Instead, we find widespread ignorance about the significance of these issues and a falling back on the timeworn cliché of "common sense," which is an *a priori*, untestable, and ideological commitment.

Thus much of the history and philosophy of ideas of recent times has indeed concerned the differences between scientific and non-scientific traditions. This is a discussion that was intimated by Vico, Kant, and Hume in the eighteenth century and then taken further by Marx and Mill in the mid-nineteenth century, extended by the Neo-Kantians in the late nineteenth century and given further powerful impetus by Empiricist Positivists in the mid-twentieth century. The terms of the current debate were largely set by the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivists and other loosely associated thinkers in the 1920s and 1930s. A key issue throughout has been whether it is possible to ground indisputably any epistemology on which to build any system of ideas and approaches to the study of any phenomena, historical, physical, intellectual, or human. Can historiographic inquiry be grounded somehow definitively? Should we understand the history of historical writing as reflecting such a long-running debate about knowledge? If so, the fundamental nature of "schools" is to be found in the sharing of common elements of a philosophical kind that cannot be grounded indisputably. These elements are implicit *a priori* ontological beliefs, epistemological assumptions about the knowledge-generating process, and corresponding methodologies of inquiry. Schools sharing these sorts of commitments have indeed been found in the histories of many discourses, such as biology and geology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when proto-sciences began to abandon biblical received wisdom, throughout the history of economics, and throughout the history of social inquiry.

Historiographies of historiography (representations of the history of historiography) are similarly typically constructed around such an organizing principle of real "schoolization." The works of Collingwood, Thompson, Breisach, and Iggers shows this clearly. Differing presuppositions of a philosophical and methodological kind, deriving from socio-religious and nationalist ideologies and increasingly supported by rationalist and idealist epistemologies, prevalent in western civilization at different epochs, have given rise to this history. However, in historiography and other areas of humanities

there is an added dimension to the debate, which concerns the role of humanistic interpretation. In the sciences and proto-sciences there developed a shared emphasis upon the development of objectivity and the removal of subjective interpretation. In historiography the nature and role of interpretation of evidence and of what counts as evidence is a central focus around which points of view have long coalesced. The complex relationship between meta-concepts, the nature of evidence, the subjectivity of evidential searches, the adducement of evidence, and the interpretation of meaning of both evidence and of the place of humanity in the socio-historical and universal schema, are all still central to historical writing. Of course, many humanistic scholars argue that no field of the socio-humanistic studies can be objective in the way that the natural sciences claim to be and that interpretation remains the central methodological task for all the humanities. Against that, historians who are strongly influenced by and use general theory and quantitative data series see no difference in philosophical principle (but differences in practice and results) between the social sciences and the natural sciences. This is the big divide in historiography of modern times. The question of theory is central to this debate but "theory" is used in two distinct ways – one denotes the idea of "theory of knowledge," that is, the problem of how historians know about and understand the past; the other denotes the idea of conceptual generalization about reality and causation as found in the generalizing social sciences. While this difference persists, the debate is bound to be somewhat unengaged (cf. Lloyd 2005).

The existence of *schools of thought* in the classical Mediterranean, medieval Islamic, and medieval European worlds (and probably within other ancient and medieval civilizations) was in varying degrees the consequence of the establishment and maintenance of real physical schools in the sense of monastic-like establishments in which students were taught and inculcated into the ways of thought of the prevailing outlook of the particular school as passed on through successive generations of teachers (cf. Collins' 1998 large-scale study of this phenomenon). This phenomenon of "real" schools has persisted in important respects to the very present. Even today we find the ascription of "school" to clusterings of thinkers and writers associated with particular locations, especially particular university departments and city precincts. The modern phenomenon of schools in which groups of historians began developing "professionalized" approaches to historiography based upon detailed explicit understandings of how to be a member of the profession with well developed training processes and accreditation of professional standards emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Guild-like organizations developed to institutionalize and maintain standards. The twin phenomena of professionalization and schoolization grew together in places such as Berlin, Cambridge, and Harvard.

In the early twenty-first century, as global communication in all its forms has dissolved most of the barriers to intellectual contact, the question of schoolization has taken on a new significance. The maintenance of "real" schools seems less and less significant while the persistence of philosophically based "virtual" schools seems enhanced. Recent debates and "historiography wars" about postmodernism, post-structuralism, critical realism, culturalism, general theory, forms and use of evidence, the use of historiography in nationalistic disputes, and so on, have involved many of the features of school-like commitments of a "pre-scientific" or "pre-disciplinary" kind and have ranged across the whole globe. Individuals are inculcated into and become

committed to particular affinity groups, based upon such commitments, via communication with people locally and in widespread locations. Historiographical debates are more alive than ever.

The clustering of thinkers into schools, then, is a consequence of philosophical disjunctures, assumptions, and commitments, and social networks or structures of power. The possibility of disagreements about fundamentals makes schools possible. Once that possibility disappears – once sciences emerge out of the hegemony of particular powerful and successful research programs that produce undisputed results via empirical and/or technological and social applications and when sciences have developed highly successful general theories about which fundamental disputes are no longer possible – then schools can no longer exist within such fields. Schools are possible, even necessary, when beliefs about the chief causal characteristics and possible understandings of the nature of the world are indeterminate, lacking any undisputed foundation of warranted true belief.

The process of teaching, learning, and mentoring is perhaps the fundamental force making for school formation. Forming or joining a school of thought resembles conversion or the joining of a religious community, followed by an inculcation process in which commitments are made based not mainly upon seemingly irrefutable evidence or tried and trusted shared techniques (although these might play some role) but upon a mixture of rational choice, persuasion, *a priori* beliefs, aesthetics, and affiliations of power and social relatedness. Lying beneath these is the pre-existing configuration of modes of thought inherited within each socio-ideational era. There are both a "path dependency" and a social process of influence and commitment that determines the development of schools. When we examine these contentions and the schools that contain the different approaches we see that they are indeed based on presuppositions of a non-consensual, non-scientific, often pre-rational, ideological kind (Lloyd 1993). Such prior commitments determine and drive the debates between schools.

Main Schools of Historiography

Modern historiography in the sense of the careful, analytical examination of its own presuppositions and the emergence of consensus, beyond local traditions that were firmly embedded within local cultures, began in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century. German universities were the most advanced in the nineteenth century in the senses of training of scholars via the Ph.D. degree and the development of research culture as part of both the liberal university ideal and the emergence of a system of scientific research that became the norm in all western countries in the twentieth century. Arguably, the first modern school was the famous Berlin or Rankian School that powerfully coalesced around, and influentially spread out from the work of Leopold Ranke in Berlin to encompass the whole historiographic profession internationally. The Rankians were a genuine "school" in the sense of the commitments, locations, connections, and lines of power and influence between the members and across generations (Thompson 1942). The success of this school arguably turned it from a nineteenth century school to a twentieth century paradigm since Rankians founded their approach upon a commitment to the use of and privileging of publicly

available documentary sources and national historiographies. These principles became orthodoxies. The neo-Rankeans developed an explicit nationalist political project of identifying historiography with political historiography, international relations, and the life and times of great statesmen and great states.

The social sciences or studies in most forms, except for economics, were most developed in Germany in the mid to late nineteenth century so it was no accident that philosophical and methodological disputes about the proper methodologies for the emerging social sciences and by implication Social Science History were strongest there. The *methodenstreit* began first in economics over the issue of inductive and historiographic methodology (as evinced by the German Historical School of economists and historians) versus deductive and abstract methodology as supported by positivist economists. The Neo-Kantian opposition (associated most with Dilthey) to positivist abstraction and scientism emphasized the necessity of the method of *Verstehen* – empathetic understanding – for the human studies in order to discover the inner feelings and motivations of historical actors. On the other hand, the Marxists argued for a different kind of scientific approach than those of either the Rankians or the positivists – one that strove to discover the deep and historical causal structures of human social structuring agents in a manner analogous to the new biological and evolutionary sciences of the mid to late nineteenth century. Max Weber attempted to bridge the divides between the generalizing theorists of the Historical School, the abstract economists, the *Verstehen* methodology, and the historical materialism of the Marxists, by emphasizing the necessary roles of both generalization and interpretation.

The socio-human studies bifurcated after the debate into two broad streams – one trying to establish in various ways the scientific credentials of their approaches, the other emphasizing the unavoidability of interpretation, hermeneutics, and common sense. The attempts of the French *Annales* School and the Weberians to construct new socio-historiographic syntheses achieved widespread support in the 1950s and 1960s but they too failed to achieve the unification of the socio-human studies. The works of Marx, Weber, Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas, Geertz, and postmodernists such as Derrida have all recently provided powerful frameworks that have offered persuasive approaches to historiographic inquiry but no consensus has emerged. In the early twenty-first century we see a panorama of historiographic approaches and “schools” clustering within a field in which the attractors are provided by six axes, as in figure 33.1, all of which draw upon more than a century of philosophizing and theorizing about historiographic and social methodology. At a higher or more meta-level we can see that the whole field tends to be divided into two broad “traditions” or “historical outlooks” as indicated by the clusters above and below the central horizontal line.

Looking down more closely at the field we can make out several loosely defined “schools.” The objectivist/structuralist side was dominant for most of the twentieth century. The most “organized” and coherent school has been that of the Marxists who cluster around such fundamental concepts and methodological postulates as “social class,” “revolution,” “ideology,” “structure-agency causation,” “material interests,” and “Historical Social Science.” Similarly, the *Annales* historians (most notably Braudel and Le Roy Ladurie) strove to unite concerns with structure on a grand geographical and historical scale with small-scale local human agency in order to uncover the multiple hidden layers of social structure and *mentalité* – to write “*histoire totale*.”

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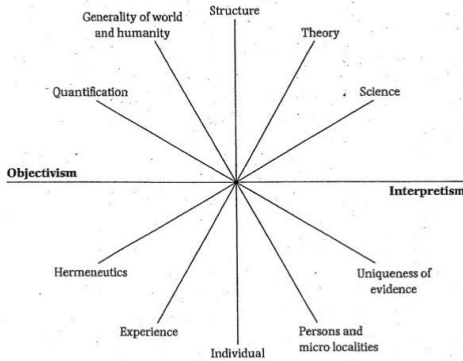


Figure 33.1 The two broad traditions of historical inquiry

The importance of regional and national mentality was given a central place in their work and this became very influential on later historians who did not necessarily share their concern with grand structural continuities beneath the surfaces of everyday life.

The "Historical Sociology" school of the anglophone world, at its height in the 1950s to 1970s, was most influenced by Weber and to a lesser extent Durkheim in its research into the history of social structural change, such as modernization and the rise of industrial societies. Like other similar schools, it pursued a close relationship between theory, research, and quantified data and consciously attempted to build a unified historiographically oriented social science.

This is also the case with Economic History, which has a long lineage from the work of Adam Smith in the mid-eighteenth century and then the adoption of evolutionary ideas in the nineteenth century in Germany and England. Marx became influential in the early twentieth century. However, a distinct new school of Economic History emerged in recent decades out of a convergence between modern orthodox economic theory, quantitative methodology, and the desire to explain the present by examining the past. The older school of Economic History, now in the guise of "Historical Political Economy" influenced by Marx, Weber, and institutionalist theory, has effectively been separated. These "outsiders" have recently combined with other streams of thought to form a new school "Historical Political Economy" that unites Evolutionary Theory with Marxism and Institutionalism.

In the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the anglophone world and those areas most influenced by it, including Germany, there arose a new, relatively coherent and synthetic school of Social History. Influenced by Marxist and Weberian ideas, by Historical Sociology and Old Economic History, and in opposition to orthodox nationalist political historiography conducted "from above," the New Social History strove to

re-orient historiography to a "bottom-up" approach. They aimed to rescue all the forgotten social classes and to restore the significance of everyday life. Likewise, the women's history movement, an offshoot of New Social History, aimed to feminize the concerns of all historians. Quantification and emphasis upon social structure played important roles in many aspects of the New Social History, at least to begin with (cf extensive discussion in Sewell 2005: ch. 2).

The most recent developments within the objectivist/structuralist side of the great divide are those of Environmental History, World History, and Big History, drawing upon influences from all the prior structuralist social science approaches and from the natural sciences. These practitioners see their task as explaining synthetically the whole history of societies and environments over very long time scales, using a variety of theories and concepts. No clear philosophical and theoretical foundation, apart from intellectual desire to explain the whole of history as structural change, holds these historians together.

The 1970s and 1980s debates over structuralism, post-structuralism, historicism, and postmodernism, sparked partly by the work of Foucault and other theorists of the centrality of language in social life, but also having deep roots in anglophone historiography stemming from the power of English so-called "common sense" as the sort of "received wisdom" of the English empiricist tradition and opposed to European grand theorizing, had several consequences for historiography. Perhaps the main one was the crystallization out of Social History in recent decades of a broad "Culturalist School" of historiography around themes of "bottom-up" *interpretive* inquiry into numerous neglected and marginalized areas of social expression and micro sites of cultural life, such as women's history, children's history, indigenous history, the history of manners, the history of death, the history of unofficial sub-cultures, and so on. There is often an explicit rejection of national historiographies. The sort of evidence relied upon is often oral and artefactual rather than official. Central elements of this school's approach include use of personal testimony, interpretation of non-documentary evidence, concepts of socio-linguistic power, rejection of quantification and generalization, emphasis upon individual uniqueness, and Micro-History. Theories and ideas from anthropology, linguistics, and cultural theory have played important roles.

Towards a Theory of the History of Historiography

Few philosophers of historiography have concerned themselves explicitly with the meta-question of why historiography has had the structure and history that have been described in such detail in the works of Collingwood, Thompson, Butterfield, Kelley, Breisach, Iggers, Bentley, and others. Indeed, some, such as Kelley (1991), have argued that fundamental aspects of historiography have remained essentially unchanged down the millennia while other aspects have changed markedly. The question of how and why historiography has changed over time is bound up, of course, with the general issue of the interrelatedness of the histories of ideas, knowledge, and societies. The theoretical and empirical study of the history and sociology of disciplines, sciences, discourses, and knowledge is now a large and flourishing area of

inquiry. As with all areas of the socio-humanistic fields of inquiry there is no scientific agreement about general concepts and explanatory theories that constitute an agreed scientific framework although there are certain themes that could be seen as the beginnings of such a consensus.

It is no longer sufficient for historians of historiography to fall back on externalist explanations that invoke nationalism, progress, and culture to explain their subject matter. Schools of ideas evolve; the questions are how and why? We can identify several candidate causes in this multi-causal picture. First is the nature of *homo intellectualis*, who, being a sub-species of humanity, seems to be powerfully motivated by a concern about moral careers and influenced by forces of social respect, deference, subservience, and domination, to form social relations that bind individuals into hierarchical social groups across generations. Second, is the influence of wider socio-economic-cultural milieux that set the contexts for modes of thought and conceptualization. Third, is the path dependency of the evolution of ideas – one can think only what the available conceptual/ideational materials permit. A discourse about the complex relationship between general theories, hermeneutics, cultural concepts, and interpretative strategies in the methodology of historiographic inquiry was not possible until most of those conceptual tools were at hand from the mid-to-late twentieth century. Their formation has not been a linear process. The history of concept formation and the schools through which concepts have been developed and articulated has been a contingent historical, branching, diverging, and re-combining path. And it seems clear that in the general sense of critical self-awareness of methodology and concept formation, historiography, especially from the nineteenth century, has followed a developmental path. From this it could be concluded that historiography is a progressive field of empirical inquiry on both the conceptual and empirical levels and new developments linking various approaches together, especially via the "Social Science History" and "World History" movements, are promising to break down the old divisions.

Will schools continue to exist? Schools are a feature of all fields of intellectual inquiry except for the advanced sciences. Those who are sceptical about the possibility of scientific historiography reject its possibility on the ground of the illimitable nature of human individual and social experiences (cf. Ankersmit 2005). From this perspective, the subject matter of historiography is *past experience*. The subjective relationship between the historian and the experience of past actors, mediated by various forms of evidence, cannot be generalized into a set of theoretical concepts. In this case, then, "schools" in the sense of particular approaches to describing, analyzing and, moreover, *interpreting* evidence, will always exist. On the other hand, the *project* of developing general and even scientific knowledge of the past drives inquiry in the direction of trying to develop general concepts and causal explanations of human motivation, behavior, consciousness, and relationships. The concept of scientific historiography that new, richer understandings of the possibility of socio-bio-behavioral science makes possible, is one in which the general and the particular inform each other in a non-deterministic manner. Boyd and Richerson's (2005) evolutionary socio-biology and Foucault's (1978) concepts and theory of "biopower" and "biopolitics" are further bridges between the science of the socialized biological realm and the socio-political experiential lifeworlds of humanity.

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Aviezer Tucker

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