

# Using the History of the Chicago Tradition of Sociology for Empirical Research

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**Background** A sociology department was opened in 1892 at the University of Chicago that became known for important research and was the main model for sociological research in the United States. Its history – and the history of the social sciences more generally – can be used to guide present-day inquires, as revealed in part by the diffusion of the Chicago tradition in France.

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**French Sociology** From the mid-1980s, references to the Chicago tradition appear frequently in French sociological writing.

- French social science in the 1980s was less directly confronted by claims that only statistical analysis guaranteed scientific integrity.
- The ethnographic method became an acceptable and appropriate approach to research.
- The Chicago tradition has especially led French researchers to pay attention to the subjective dimension of behavior and to situational dynamics.
- Historical knowledge is essential when it comes to avoiding the obstacles created by differences of national culture.

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**History** The transmission of knowledge in the social sciences requires a history that explains earlier works in the context of their production and circulation.

- Such a history, which gives access to the categories of thought, judgment and action of those who produced the earlier work does three things:
  1. Lets its readers understand the overall social experience of these authors.
  2. Clarifies the relations between their analyses and the debates of their time.
  3. Sheds light on the relations between their analyses and those of predecessors, rivals and allies.
- Such a history challenges the belief that you can separate the abstract schemes elaborated by sociological research from the context of its production.

- You could not, until the 1980s, find such analyses in the history of sociology or of the social sciences.
    1. Works in these fields consisted of analyses of ideas about the social world.
    2. These histories were based on the critical analysis of texts.
    3. The inspiration of such history was always presentist and fundamentally normative.
    4. These histories were analyzed with current categories . . . judgments were made according to the norms of the social sciences of the time.
  - Besides constituting the core of the culture of a discipline fragmented into specialties that are not closely related, this type of history conveys essential elements of sociologists' professional ideology.
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#### **Another Type of History**

Another type of history of social science has developed over the last thirty years that uses different sources, different approaches, and different questions.

- They try to understand the products of research in the context of their time and look at production activities as well as institutional or other activities that accompany them – known as “full history.”
  - They aim to objectify norms of judgment and do not apply today's criteria to works of the past.
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#### **Coexistence of the Two Types of History**

Today, the two types of historical analysis coexist, almost without controversy.

- The projection of today's categories onto the past is the kind of error no historical study can be sure to escape.
  - Explicit or implicit judgments, made according to unspecified criteria, inevitably threaten histories of social science because their producers are part of the universe they are studying, which makes objective work difficult.
  - The peaceful coexistence of these two types of history creates problems because they don't serve the same purposes.
    1. Presentist histories of social science are used to defend the professional ideologies of academic disciplines.
    2. A full history, turned toward understanding the past, constitutes an instrument better adapted than presentist history for the use of past analyses by current researchers.
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## **Chicago Sociology**

Studying the enterprise that Chicago sociology was, by placing it in the academic and sociopolitical contexts in which the work was carried out, lets us discover a universe profoundly different from that of any current researcher.

- We can thus discover the affinities, but also the differences, between the abstract analyses of the Chicago sociologists and the viewpoint of the white, protestant, Anglo-Saxons on ethnic relations.
- The Chicago sociologists started from what appeared to the middle classes as a fact of urban life: immigrants and the problems they brought with them.
- The sociologists distanced themselves from the way social reformers, politicians, and journalists defined these problems in terms of ethnic attributes by reasoning in terms of relations between groups.
- The sociologists also studied the process of contacts between these populations, as well as the significance of behavior that the subjects themselves sometimes didn't understand – they paid little attention to work relations or to class and gender differences.

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## **French Sociology**

At the time the Americans were carrying out their research, researchers in France didn't find their conceptual schemes relevant.

- Their concerns centered on class antagonisms rather than ethnicity or immigration.
- French sociologists believed that immigrant populations were rapidly assimilated – they recognized no differences of religion and ethnic origin, and thus immigration was not a problem that needed study.

- Three quarters of a century later, the social representations that gave birth to these analyses of American and French societies have been deeply shaken.
  1. The study of immigrant groups has belatedly become an area of research of French sociology just as social class and gender are now a focus of American sociologists.
  2. This comparative history demonstrates that research and conceptual schemes elaborated by the social sciences depend on social representations of the objects studied in the societies the researchers belong to.
  3. Comparison with other societies and other situations is in fact the main tool the social sciences have to free themselves from social representations that arise in public controversies in a given period.
  4. A full history makes possible a conception of social science disentangled from the conceptions of its practitioners and from their professional ideologies.
  5. By bringing the diverse elements that influenced research products into the open (e.g., uncertainties in the collection of data and its interpretation, rivalries and alliances between researchers, subjective relations of researchers to their careers), historical analyses help define a renewed and deepened conception of empirical research and its results.

**Explaining Research Practices**

The conception of social science to which these historical analyses lead converges with the one developed in the analyses of researchers who, since the 1970s, have been writing about their own research practices.

- Some study report writing.
- Others study the writing and selection of field notes in ethnographic studies.
- Still others study the consequences of different kinds of relations between researchers and their subjects and the uncertainties and the dynamics of these relations.

**Note:** This process of explaining research practices is itself worth historical study.

**Conclusion**

We need a comparative historical approach to help us understand research that was carried out in a universe we weren't part of.

- A true history of social sciences, not a presentist history, is one of the best ways to achieve such mastery.
- This knowledge is especially fertile when its object is a going concern of empirical research on a certain scale, which has lasted enough to allow the progressive elaboration of its chief ideas.

- The Chicago tradition is such a case, as are the histories of *Annals* and English social anthropology.