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Review of: The Cambridge History of Science, Volume 7: The Modern Social Sciences edited by Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross

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This hefty tome is volume seven in the eight-volume Cambridge History of Science series under the general editorship of Wisconsin historians of science David C. Lundberg and Ronald L. Numbers. The book consists of an introduction by the two editors and forty-two other chapters parceled out under four broad categories. Part I “Sciences of the Social to the Late Nineteenth Century,” contains eleven papers on a variety of topics in the history, sociology, and philosophy of the various lines of inquiry that eventually precipitated out into the different social science disciplines at the end of the nineteenth century. This section includes two chapters that explicitly discuss the history of economics—chapter 10 on “Continental Political Economy from the Physiocrats to the Marginal Revolution” by Keith Tribe and chapter 11 on “British Economic Theory from Locke to Marshall” by Margaret Schabas—as well as a related chapter on Marx and Marxism by Terrell Carver. Part II focuses on the history of the various social sciences in Western Europe and North America since the end of the nineteenth century. This section contains nine chapters, each dedicated to a particular discipline (psychology, political science, sociology, etc.), and it also includes another paper that concentrates specifically on economics: Mary Morgan’s chapter 16 on “Economics.” Part III contains eight chapters on the development of the social sciences outside of Europe and North America; some of these focus on specific countries (China, Japan, India, etc.) while others have a more regional emphasis (Latin American, African, Russian, and Eastern European, etc.). Many of these papers attempt to discuss all, or at least most, of the literature from a particular region that concerns social science, while others emphasize only one specific field where scholars from the region were particularly active. Chapter 24 on “Psychology in Russian and Central Europe” and chapter 25 on “Sociology in Egypt and Morrocco” are of this latter type. The final section is titled “Social Science as Discourse and Practice in Public and Private Life” and it covers a wide range of topics involving the use and practice of the social sciences, as well as how those practices interact with various other social, political, and conceptual movements and ideas. Here one finds chapters on the history of social welfare, intelligence testing, gender, race, cultural relativism, and related topics.

All in all this is a very impressive volume. The papers are well-written and extremely informative. To some degree all authors have their own “take” on the literature they are discussing, but the editors were careful to make certain the volume retains its coherence throughout. To this end all of the chapters address a general academic audience and have a relatively consistent tone and style; this is clearly a book and not simply a collection of independent papers. Each author seems to make a concerted effort—or perhaps the editors forced them to make a concerted effort—to explain what was going on in their area of inquiry with only a minimal amount of interpretative license. The four main sections also make useful distinctions among the various topics. From the title alone one would expect to find chapters on the intellectual precursors to the social sciences as well as specific chapters on each of the social sciences in the twentieth century, but many of the regional papers in Part III and the cross-disciplinary topics in Part IV came as quite a surprise.
From the perspective of a practicing historian of economic thought, the volume’s greatest strength is also perhaps the greatest weakness of the economics chapters. Because the volume is intended for a very general audience—and succeeds quite effectively in that regard—the chapters that are dedicated to the history of economic thought have little to offer the specialist. The Schabas and Tribe papers in Part I are both very clear and very well-written, and represent excellent summaries of their respective subject matters, but are relatively standard histories of familiar material. The Morgan paper in Part II is more interpretative—emphasizing the profession’s changing tools, its commitment to particular modeling strategies that stabilized over time, and the importance of the role of government in the professionalization of economics—but even here historians of economic thought would probably be better served by Morgan’s many other contributions to these subject areas. Although such comments may sound negative, they are not intended to be; books are written for particular audiences and historians of economic thought are only a very small portion of this volume’s intended audience. All three of the economics chapters are well-researched, well-thought-out, and well-written, doing what they were supposed to do extremely well, it is just that they were not intended to wow historians of economic thought with new results or shock them with controversial remarks. Such is the nature of project. They will serve very well to introduce historians from other areas of the social sciences to the main themes in the history of economic thought.

On the other hand, specialists in the history of economic thought may benefit directly from many of the “border crossing” papers that touch on various issues in the history and methodology of economics, but do not explicitly emphasize disciplinary economics. Two chapters by the editors, Dorothy Ross’s chapter 13 on the changing contours of social science and Ted Porter’s chapter 14 on statistics and social science, are examples of papers that offer numerous insights into the interaction of (and reaction to) economics and other disciplines. Although it is probably unfair to single out just a few particular papers from the many stimulating cross-disciplinary contributions, I would just note that I found Jan Goldstein’s chapter 9 on psyche and science, Ellen Herman’s chapter 38 on the psychologization of childhood, and David Hollinger’s chapter 42 on cultural relativism to be particularly thought-provoking papers that made me think about various issues related to my own research in interesting and unusual ways.

Finally, I found that I really enjoyed many of the chapters that had little or nothing to do with my own research. This was probably my most pleasant surprise in reading the volume. First, I did not expect chapters on topics like the social sciences in China, India, Morocco, and Latin America; and second, I found many of these chapters to be quite engrossing. These papers were very informative and well-written discussions of areas where I had very little background knowledge, but where, after reading the chapters, I felt like I wanted to (and should) know more. I suspect that was exactly the editors’ goal for these chapters. It is useful to note that experts in these regions would undoubtedly say similar positive things about the three chapters on the history of economics. I found all of the studies in Part III very interesting, but chapter 24 on psychology in Russia and Eastern Europe, chapter 26 on social science in Africa, and chapter 29 on Japan were exceptionally so.

Overall this is an excellent volume. It should be in every academic library and on the shelf of anyone interested in the history of social science. The chapters cover a
massive amount of literature, and every author does an excellent job making the material accessible to the general academic reader. Keep it handy for students and keep it handy as a reminder to not lose sight of the broader forest when working on our own disciplinary trees.

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