Economics and Sociology: From Complementary to Competing Perspectives

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We historians know less than we should about internal differentiation among the social sciences. What is it that makes a political scientist a political scientist, an anthropologist an anthropologist, a psychologist a psychologist? Social sciences define themselves against one another just as they define their boundaries against amateur discourse and the natural sciences. Although it has been the rare social scientist who has commented explicitly on the relationship between his or her discipline and another, implicit understandings of those relationships have been significant not only for how social scientists thought of themselves but also for the kinds of work they did. Although there are some examples of the comparative history of disciplines (Calhoun 1992; Gross 2007), it remains an understudied field.

This relative gap in the history of the social sciences results from the fact that much history of the social sciences is written as histories of individual disciplines. Today, we have come a long way from the once-dominant "discipline history" approach that offered self-serving narratives of the past to justify current disciplinary trends (Collini 1988). Nevertheless, historians housed in the social sciences, for obvious professional reasons, tend to focus largely on developments in their home disciplines. Intellectual historians, on the other hand, tend to focus on the broader cultural significance of the social sciences. They identify common trends across the social sciences such as professionalization, analyze differences

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that cut across the social sciences such as the distinction between positivist and historicist approaches, and examine how the social sciences were transformed by external changes, such as the Cold War. But they have sometimes paid less attention than they might have to the significance of differences between disciplines.

A prominent recent historiographical trend in the history of postwar social science has correctly pointed to the importance of cross-disciplinary ventures in the postwar United States (Cohen-Cole 2007; Backhouse and Fontaine, this volume; Emmett, this volume; Isaac, this volume). Nevertheless, we should not forget that disciplines remained central institutions shaping the production of academic knowledge. As Andrew Abbott (2001) reminds us, since the turn of the twentieth century, when separate professional organizations and academic departments formed around distinct disciplines, disciplinary institutions have been remarkably stable, even as the content and methods of the disciplines themselves have changed. Even in the post-1945 period, the cross-disciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard and Committee for Social Thought at the University of Chicago were the exceptions rather than the norm. The overwhelming majority of academic social scientists, even those prominently involved in cross-disciplinary exchange, had clear disciplinary homes. Indeed, one could argue that the existence of well-established disciplines since 1945 has often been an important condition for cross-disciplinary exchange.

No example better illustrates the significance of differences between social scientific disciplines than the case of economics and sociology in recent decades. This essay examines four different ways in which economists and sociologists have defined their disciplines against one another in the post-1945 United States. It argues that understandings of that relationship shifted from seeing the fields as complementary to seeing them as competitive. Of course, any complete understanding of how social scientific disciplines differentiate themselves from one another would have to comprehend not only the relationship between one discipline and another but also how disciplines differentiate themselves from all of the other social sciences, not to mention the humanities and natural sciences. Yet it simplifies matters to focus on only two disciplines. The relationship of economics to sociology presents a particularly good case study; in many senses each has been the most significant discipline against which the other has defined itself. Indeed, for economists, sociology has often been a stand-in for all other social scientific disciplines. As one economist has noted, "'Sociological' as generally used in economics, is a shorthand for other social science disciplines" (Piore 1973, 377). Economics has also been an important touchstone for sociologists, for they are often intent to make a basic argument that there exists a social sphere that cannot be understood in economic terms (Brick 1996).

Since economists and sociologists have rarely considered the relationship between the two disciplines in explicit terms, it has been necessary not simply to analyze their explicit statements but also to reconstruct their understanding of the relationship from their general approaches to social scientific work. This essay first presents a heuristic model that aims to capture the different ways in which the division of labor between economics and sociology has been construed. Second, it sketches how such categories can be used for understanding the relationship between the two disciplines in the United States since the end of World War II. This essay focuses on identifying the explicit and implicit self-understandings of economists and sociologists about the differences between their respective disciplines. While it identifies what I view as the four most prominent ways to understand this disciplinary relationship, it does not claim to be exhaustive. Although I focus on self-understandings, I relate these to the significant structures and transformations of each discipline in the post-1945 period.

Any such investigation must confront three essential facts about the nature of social scientific disciplines. First, social scientific disciplines are historical in nature and change in relationship to both internal disciplinary developments and transformations in the wider social world. To understand the relationship between disciplines, one must take into account historical change. Second, disciplines are internally diverse and subject at all times to competing notions about the proper methods and subject areas of their field. The degree of disciplinary coherence varies from discipline to discipline and from period to period; indeed one of the crucial differences between economics and sociology today is the much greater dominance of a mainstream in the former as compared with the latter. Nevertheless, a single "paradigm" has never dominated a social scientific field in the same way that Thomas Kuhn (1962) famously argued paradigms have for the natural sciences. Because economists have never agreed what "economics" is (Backhouse and Medema 2009) and sociologists have never agreed what "sociology" is, there have been multiple ways to conceive of the relationship between the two. Particular kinds of sociologists have always defined themselves against particular kinds of economists, and vice versa. Nevertheless, we can and must still make generalizations about disciplines. For, while social scientific disciplines are internally diverse, distinctions between them are very real. Thus, while there is no single answer to the question of what distinguishes one social scientific discipline from another, distinctions between the two are not arbitrary but rather reflect core matters of intellectual identity.

Four Ways to Conceive of the Relationship between Economics and Sociology

To understand the different ways in which sociologists and economists construed the relationship between their disciplines, I employ four categories. This taxonomy should not be understood as a rigid system of classifications but as a heuristic device that enables us to better comprehend how social scientists have understood the division of labor between these two fields. The categories are not exhaustive, and they are intended to understand the relationship between economics and sociology during the post-1945 United States. Nevertheless, similar sets of categories may prove useful in grasping differences between other social sciences in other times and places. In constructing these categories, I have drawn two key distinctions. The first has to do with whether the nature of the relationship between sociology and economics is conceived of as complementary or competitive. The second considers whether the distinction between the two is drawn in terms of their differences as scholarly disciplines or in terms of the public face of the intellectual field as oriented toward wider social and political discourse. This latter distinction is important to consider. Social scientific work is often directed at particular audiences outside the academy, most notably government policymakers and foundation officials. In this essay, however, I concentrate primarily on the contributions of social scientists to a broader cultural and political discourse. Historians of social science with a more institutional bent often neglect this more amorphous but less-mediated influence that social science exerts on public opinion. I briefly define each category and then use them to offer a historical sketch of the post-1945 period.

Professional

The relationship can be seen in disciplinary terms as complementary if both economics and sociology are considered mature and autonomous scientific disciplines with distinct methods and subject areas. I have called this the "professional" conception because it is embodied in the logic of academic specialization associated with the modern research university. This understanding predominated during the 1945–68 period and still remains an important way to comprehend the distinction between the two fields.

Classical

Second, the relationship can be seen as complementary but defined in public terms. In this view, the purpose of social science as a whole is to offer an understanding of society that sheds light on pressing contemporary issues for a broader public. Unlike the three other categories, this approach denies any key distinctions between sociology and economics, preferring to stress the unified nature of social scientific work and the embeddedness of the economy in the wider society. In this category, scholars employ the concepts of economy and society while denying any clear intellectual division of labor between the two. I have called this the “classical” conception in reference to the nineteenth-century tradition of social thought in which the study of economics and sociology were not clearly distinguished from one another. This tradition had a significant legacy in the twentieth century, particularly during the 1945–68 period when it served as an alternative to the notion of the two fields as professionally autonomous and to mainstream specialized academic social science as a whole.

Boundary Disputes

Third, the relationship can be seen in disciplinary terms as competitive. In this conception, while each discipline has a distinct approach, these are seen as different ways to explain the same social phenomena. I have called this the “boundary disputes” conception, for in this view economics and sociology compete over scholarly turf, particularly with regard to the disputed subject area that lies between the two. This understanding became increasingly common after the disciplines of sociology and economics were differently affected by the crisis of the social sciences that began in the latter part of the 1960s.

Economy versus Society

Fourth, the relationship can be seen as an antagonistic one but, instead of focusing on the disciplines as offering competing scholarly approaches, they are distinguished ideologically in terms of the larger political and social values that they advance in the public sphere. Especially with the rise of neoliberalism in recent decades, an "economic" approach has often come to connote an economically conservative, market-oriented politics, while a "sociological" approach connotes a defense of society against unfettered markets, typically from a left-wing point of view. In this understanding, to view the social world from the standpoint of the economy or the society produces markedly different perspectives. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, this conception of the differences between the two fields was increasingly voiced by sociologists and within the public sphere at large.

All four conceptions of the relationship between sociology and economics have existed throughout the post-1945 period. However, the relative strength of each conception has changed significantly from the earlier period (1945–68) to the later period (1968–present).[1] In particular, competitive understandings of the relationship between the two disciplines have gained strength at the expense of complementary understandings.

Professional Understandings: Autonomous Disciplines

In the United States, the disciplines of economics and sociology had a closely related history in the late nineteenth century, but in the early twentieth century they developed distinct disciplinary institutions. In 1905 the American Sociological Society split off from the American Economic Association (AEA), an organization that had itself hived off from the all-purpose American Social Science Association in 1885 (Furner 1975; Haskell 1977; Ross 1991). As Young (2009) has demonstrated, however, the two disciplines maintained close relations for the first four decades of the twentieth century. The AEA and the American Sociological Society frequently held joint meetings, and sociology was often housed in economics departments within universities. However, as institutional economics, which had fostered interest in sociology among economists, lost disciplinary clout by the end of the 1930s, collaboration between economists and sociologists sharply declined.

1. This is a rough chronology. The choice of 1968 as a breaking point is not meant to signify that all changes happened in this one year. Rather, there was a long period of transition stretching from the mid-1960s well into the 1970s, the effects of which were not fully apparent until the 1980s. Change in the social sciences is often gradual, as it takes many years for a younger generation to establish itself and for senior scholars to change their minds, retire, or die.

Thus, by 1945, the two disciplines had well-established, autonomous institutions including professional organizations, PhD-producing departments at research universities, and professional journals. Yet the immediate postwar period in the United States witnessed what Neil Gross (2008) terms a "second wave of professionalization" that strengthened the specialized research university as organized into separate academic disciplines (Schorske 1997). As part of this professionalization, social scientists, along with humanists, placed a new emphasis on rigor as a marker of quality academic work. A crucial component of professional ideology is that each discipline has distinct methods and subject areas. Thus one feature of enhanced professionalization in the postwar period was a sharpened sense of disciplinary identity. The prominent cross-disciplinary ventures of this period are best seen as reactions against this strong sense of disciplinary differentiation, as in the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, or as ventures seeking to combine the insights of multiple disciplines in which the autonomy of each was a precondition for cross-disciplinary exchange, as with the Department of Social Relations at Harvard.

This period was one of relative consensus on disciplinary methods and subject areas following a more confused interwar period and preceding the divisions that ensued by the end of the 1960s. Accordingly, the professional conception of the relationship of economics and sociology predominated from 1945 to 1968. During this period, most economists and sociologists understood their disciplines as having distinct methods and separate subject matters. Some scholars today are inclined to lump together all the social sciences as following a "scientistic" or "positivist" methodological trend in the immediate postwar period (Steinmetz 2007). Yet, if we compare these two disciplines, it is apparent that economics was more abstract and nomothetic; sociology by comparison was empirical and interpretive. In the post-1945 period, mathematical modeling became the primary method used by economists; while sociologists experimented with survey research methods (Paul Lazarsfeld) and grand theoretical models (Talcott Parsons), they still employed primarily nonmathematical means of explanation.

In terms of subject area, economics was understood as the study of the "economy," a distinct social realm with its own laws; microeconomics studied how markets function by focusing on the individual decisions of economic actors; macroeconomics studied the economic factors that came into operation when a society was considered as a whole, largely to gauge the potential effectiveness of government policy strategies. Throughout its history, sociology has been a less clearly defined discipline than economics, often vacillating from a self-understanding as the "queen of the social sciences" (i.e., providing general theory based on the specific research of other disciplines) or as a residual discipline studying those issues ignored by economists and political scientists such as social class, family structure, social psychology, crime, race, and ethnicity.

In the post–World War II period, many sociologists had a new confidence in the autonomy of their field, as reflected in the influential distinction Parsons drew between sociology and economics in his 1937 *The Structure of Social Action*. Parsons (1935, 666) believed that "there has been both too much sociology . . . in economics as well as too much economics in sociology." Although he challenged the utilitarian theory of social action as a general theory of social behavior, Parsons ascribed validity to marginal economics within its own sphere. According to him, economics effectively studies that arena in which actors are oriented toward maximizing material gains, but needs to be supplemented with sociological insight into how the values that orient social action are instilled and an understanding of those noneconomic areas of society in which nonutilitarian values prevail (Parsons 1937; Velthuis 1999). Thus sociologists and economists could collaborate on understanding concrete problems, but only if it was understood that each brought an autonomous perspective to bear. But in the postwar period, Parsons was more interested in collaborating with psychologists and anthropologists than with economists (Brick 2000). It is true that Parsons cowrote one of the few books in the 1945–68 period that explicitly considered the relationship between economics and sociology. *Economy and Society* (Parsons and Smelser 1956), which considered the economy as an autonomous subsystem within the broader social system, is often cited by economic sociologists as a key work of the immediate postwar period. At the time, however, *Economics and Sociology* was one of Parsons's least-read books. Indeed, because of his own ignorance of contemporary developments within economics, Parsons even had to enlist an undergraduate, Neil Smelser, as a coauthor (Swedberg 1990, 201).

American sociologists' willingness to grant economics its due as a specialized science rested partly on the assumption of the "end of ideology" liberals who dominated the profession that the post–New Deal mixed economy had fundamentally solved the material problems of capitalism. Such sociologists saw the real problems of American society as being psychological or sociological in nature, relegating economics to a mere matter of technical manipulation (Lipsitz 1960). Indeed, during this period, economists themselves tended to view their discipline as providing tools to policymakers to tinker with a fundamentally sound mixed economy. Economists in the post-1945 period thought less explicitly about the distinction between the two disciplines, but if their practice is any indication, they were content to leave messier social issues to sociologists and other social scientists while concentrating on constructing rigorous models of the economy (Morgan 2003; Bernstein 2001). Parsons's distinction between the two fields was adopted by the influential economist Paul Samuelson (1948) who distinguished between economics, which dealt with "rational" action, and sociology, which dealt with "nonrational" action. Thus sociologists and economists generally saw their work as separate enterprises. While sociologists collaborated a great deal with social scientists in other disciplines during the postwar period, they had fewer relationships with economists, who, as Jefferson Pooley and Mark Solovey have demonstrated in this volume, remained the most aloof of the social scientists to postwar cross-disciplinary ventures.

Classical Understandings: Ignoring Disciplinary Boundaries, Addressing Public Problems

An exclusive focus on professional social science ignores alternative varieties of social science more ambivalent about the development of research specializations. If we shift our attention away from those viewpoints that held the most power in professional journals and organizations and focus instead on the kinds of social science that had broader appeal within public discourse, we must recognize the persistence of older traditions of social science that eschewed disciplinary boundary divisions, even well into the post–World War II period. Such thinkers upheld a "classical" notion that viewed economics and sociology not as autonomous disciplines but as fields contributing to a generalist social science that provided solutions to public problems.

In the postwar period, most economists and sociologists were convinced that there were clear distinctions between the two disciplines and viewed this as a mark of scientific maturity. But a vocal minority of social scientists, whose impact was most felt in public debate, protested against disciplinary specialization, holding to older notions of a more holistic social science. After all, were Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Thorstein Veblen economists or sociologists? Clearly, they saw themselves as both. This classical approach believed in the fundamental unity of social scientific inquiry and sought to encompass the study of social phenomena in the broadest sense of the term; such an approach integrated the insights not just of economics and sociology but also of political science, psychology, history, anthropology, and other related fields. Such classical social theorists frequently mixed the concepts of economy and society, speaking of a "socially embedded economy" or of "economic society."

Many prominent social scientists of this period fit this category. C. Wright Mills's 1959 call for revitalizing "classical social thought" in *The Sociological Imagination* was directed not just at other sociologists but at all social scientists. Indeed, in a footnote he made clear that "social scientific imagination" was a more accurate rendering of his concept, one he eschewed because of the phrase's inelegance and its scientistic connotations (Mills 1959, 18–19n). In a 1954 article that anticipated the themes of the book, Mills listed a diverse range of social scientists who he believed continued to work in the classical mode, including Robert Dahl, John Kenneth Galbraith, Harold Lasswell, Charles Lindblom, Gunnar Myrdal, David Riesman, Joseph Schumpeter, and the thinkers of the Frankfurt school. Yet even Mills's rival, the quintessential professionalizer Parsons, can be seen as holding at times to the idea of a holistic general social science. Although Parsons insisted on clear divisions among different disciplines, in the postwar period he also sought to integrate the insights of all social scientific disciplines to provide a general theory of social action and a more complete picture of the social system (Parsons and Shils 1951; Parsons 1951). Many of the figures attracted to "classical" conceptions of the boundaries between social scientific disciplines in the postwar period were, like Mills and Parsons, indebted to institutional economics and the German tradition of historical social science.

One might expect sociologists to have been most attracted to classical notions of social science, for sociology has always remained the most general of the social sciences while economics became more of a technical discipline akin to engineering (Morgan 2003). Yet, even within economics, there were those who rejected clear boundaries between their discipline and other social sciences and who shared a commitment to analyzing capitalism as a historical phenomenon in which the study of society and economics could not easily be distinguished. Mills's list included three economists: Galbraith, Myrdal, and Schumpeter. A Harvard economist and political adviser, Galbraith (1958), in such books as *The Affluent Society*, criticized the notion that economic growth should be viewed as an end in itself and argued that economic development should serve broader social goals. The Swedish economist Myrdal is best known in the U.S. context as the author of an enormously influential book on race relations, *An American Dilemma*, but in his 1963 book *Challenge to Affluence* he coined the term "underclass," which brought renewed attention among social scientists and policymakers to issues of economic inequality (Myrdal 1963; Jackson 1990). An Austrian émigré, Schumpeter frequently touched on sociological topics in his wide-ranging explorations into the nature of different economic systems. As he once commented, "There is nothing surprising in the habit of economists to invade the sociological field. A large part of their work—practically the whole of what they have to say on institutions and on the forces that shape economic behavior—inevitably overlaps the sociologist's preserves" (quoted in Swedberg 1991).

One could also point to two economists that Mills left off his list: Karl Polanyi and Robert Heilbroner. An Austrian émigré, Polanyi (1944) in his classic work of historical social theory, *The Great Transformation*, posited that market economies are always necessarily socially embedded and analyzed the catastrophic and ultimately self-defeating consequences of extending free market principles to all of society. An economist at the New School, Heilbroner studied capitalism as a historical and contemporary phenomenon; his 1953 book, *The Worldly Philosophers*, a study of great economists that emphasizes their roles as social and political thinkers, has sold over 4 million copies and has to date been printed in seven different editions. Like similarly minded sociologists, these economists saw a strong public purpose to social science, believing that they must educate citizens about what is going on in their world. In other words, their common orientation toward social problems outweighed their commitment to any particular disciplinary project.

These figures had a complicated and ambivalent relationship to academic disciplines. Galbraith was president of the American Economic Association in 1971, but many economists ignored his work. Myrdal's work was far more influential on public discourse than it was on the American economics profession and was more influential among sociologists than among economists. Schumpeter's notion of "creative destruction" had wide cultural currency, but his brand of economics was never adopted by most American economists, and in any case he was dead by 1950. Polanyi never achieved clout within the American academic system, although his work has followers in sociology, anthropology, and political science. Heilbroner's *Worldly Philosophers* was often used to introduce students to the study of economics, and even inspired some to become economists, yet he too was a marginal figure in the discipline (Carroll 1998). Nevertheless, if we look at the public impact of social scientific ideas, such figures cannot be ignored, as they were major contributors to the intellectual debates of their day. In a period in which a relative consensus prevailed in social scientific disciplines based on strong professional identities, social scientific alternatives were often framed in terms that elided, transcended, or rejected disciplinary boundaries.

Boundary Disputes: Battles over Scholarly Turf in an Age of "Economics Imperialism"

In the late 1960s, the social sciences underwent significant transformation. A series of intellectual and political events helped fracture the relative consensus on the aims and methods of social science just as they ruptured the Cold War and post–New Deal consensus in the political sphere. Dissenting economists founded the Union for Radical Political Economics in 1968 as an alternative to the American Economic Association, and the 1968 meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) saw the airing of sharp critiques of mainstream sociology. The two disciplines were affected in profoundly different ways. Although radical economists mounted a serious challenge to orthodox economics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and a heterodox strain has remained part of the discipline to this day, for the most part the discipline managed to beat back the radical challenge and by the mid-1970s had reasserted a strong sense of professional identity based on notions of scholarly objectivity that eschewed radical political commitments (Mata 2005, 2009). Sociology, on the other hand, was profoundly transformed by the radical challengers, many of whom eventually achieved leading positions within the discipline (Oppenheimer, Murray, and Levine 1991; Sica and Turner 2006; Platt 2010). After 1968 sociology became an unusually diverse discipline with a variety of competing voices but a weak sense of disciplinary cohesion (Calhoun and Van Antwerpen 2007), an excellent example of what Thomas Bender and Carl Schorske (1997) call a "pluralized" discipline, while economics remained by comparison tightly unified. The different ways in which economics and sociology were affected by post-1968 developments shifted ideas about the relationship between them toward competitive rather than complementary understandings.

The "professional" understanding of the division of labor between sociology and economics remained a powerful one even after 1968, embedded as it was in the disciplinary institutions that organize scholarly inquiry. But the notion that sociology and economics were autonomous disciplines with both separate methods and distinct subject matters was increasingly challenged from both directions. In the post-1968 period, sociologists and economists increasingly encroached on the other's traditional subject matter; economists argued that sociological problems could best be understood using economic models, and vice versa. The possibility that sociologists and economists would compete for scholarly turf was always implicit in the understanding that the two disciplines had two distinct approaches to the study of social phenomena. Even the 1945–68 period saw contests between competing approaches over similar subject matter; the cross-disciplinary work of modernization theorists, for instance, sought to provide an alternative to developmental economics by building especially on insights gleaned from sociology and political science (Gilman 2003, 79–84). The post-1968 period, however, saw a sharp increase in instances in which disciplines could no longer agree on clear topical boundaries. Accordingly, unlike the earlier period when such boundaries could often be taken for granted, after 1968 there was a fair amount of explicit discussion about the distinctions between the two disciplines.

Since the 1980s economic sociology has arisen as a distinct subfield within sociology. Economic sociologists have claimed classical social thought as an important heritage, although they have sought to integrate that work into a disciplinary, not a public, setting. Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg (1994), for instance, recast social thinkers such as Émile Durkheim, Marx, and Weber not as general social scientists who addressed the public issues of their day but as "classical sociological economists" whose work helped established the scholarly subfield of today. Many of its proponents described economic sociology as a promising boundary area between sociology and economics that fosters cross-disciplinary exchange. Swedberg (1991, 267), for instance, wrote of a new "border area between economists and sociologists" made up of "new institutional economics" and "new sociology of economic life." Yet these exchanges are better understood not as collaborations but as border skirmishes over scholarly turf, with both economists and sociologists claiming some of the other discipline's territory. Many calling themselves economic sociologists, for example, were increasingly willing to challenge economists on their own turf. They no longer accepted the Parsonian division of labor between the disciplines, which had granted neoclassical economics validity within its own sphere. For example, the most prominent of the new economic sociologists, Mark Granovetter (1985), argues that the embeddedness of the economy in social mechanisms such as social networks renders suspect many of the guiding assumptions of mainstream economics.

In the 1945–68 period most economists were content to leave the messy problems defined as sociological to the sociologists. This remains true for many economists today. One economist, Jim March, put it this way: economists steer clear of the "saloons of sociology," keeping instead to the "well-ordered Methodist Church of economics" (quoted in Kreps 1997, 77). Yet the 1970s saw increased attempts by rational choice theorists to extend economic methods to the study of social phenomena previously considered by sociologists rather than economists. Although rational choice methods were developed in the immediate postwar period by thinkers associated with RAND, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that they began to be adopted in large-scale terms within social-scientific disciplines themselves (Amadae 2003). After 1968, to a much greater extent than in the previous period, economists claimed that their discipline could offer a general explanation for the phenomenon studied by all the social sciences. According to Hirshleifer (1985, 53), for example, "What gives economics its imperialist invasive power is that our analytical categories—scarcity, cost, preferences, opportunities, etc.—are truly universal in applicability." The key figure attempting to import economic methods to sociology was Gary Becker, who starting in the late 1950s argued that many subject areas traditionally the preserve of sociologists, including family structure, racial discrimination, and criminology, could best be comprehended using economic methods and by understanding individuals as behaving on the basis of rational self-interest. This line of inquiry culminated in Becker's 1976 publication of *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Becker's views were increasingly influential within sociology by the early 1980s. An economist at the University of Chicago, in 1982 he received a joint appointment to the Department of Sociology (Swedberg 1990, 34).

Under the name of rational choice theory, economic methods made some inroads within sociology; James Coleman, for example, worked closely with Becker, coteaching a class on rational choice methods with him at Chicago, although Coleman (1990) sought to give a distinctively sociological character to the theory by emphasizing the effects of individual preferences on social outcomes (Swedberg 1990). Statistical sociologists in particular, an important subset of the discipline were attracted to rational choice because they were already inclined to view society in aggregative terms; indeed, Coleman had been a student of Lazarsfeld. Nevertheless, compared with political science, where rational choice methods gained a significant foothold, sociology proved a less hospitable environment (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). Most sociologists rejected what they saw as “economics imperialism,” the attempt to colonize their discipline with economic methods unsuited for the study of sociological phenomenon. They resisted rational choice primarily because of its economistic emphasis on individual choice and neglect of structural constraints. Thus the post-1968 period witnessed the renewed relevance of the economist James Duesenberry’s 1960 aphorism about the disciplines: “Economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how they don’t have any choices to make” (quoted in Barron and Hannan 1994, 1118). It is fair to say that economics was on the offensive during this period, given its superior resources and prestige within the university system and its greater utility for political elites. Sociologists such as Granovetter may have challenged economics on its own turf, but they were rarely taken seriously by economists. In contrast, through the vehicle of rational choice, economists managed to gain a hearing within sociology. To a significant extent, the border dispute between economics and sociology was fought within sociology’s territory.

Compared with the earlier period examined here, the post-1968 period did witness more examples of cross-disciplinary exchange between economists and sociologists. In addition to the connection between Becker and Coleman in applying rational choice methods to sociological problems, there was collaboration in subfields such as network theory (Smith-Doerr and Powell 1994). Yet for the most part the post-1968 period saw conflict rather than collaboration between the two disciplines, even in those areas where one might have expected greater cooperation. The study of economic institutions might seem a genuine meeting point between economists and sociologists, yet the so-called new institutionalists in economics have not adopted sociological methods but sought to apply economic norms of efficiency to the study of economic institutions. Economic sociologists, on the other hand, have a much broader sense of the institutional basis for and constraints on economic behavior, arguing that economic phenomena cannot be understood outside their social settings. In this sense, the true heirs of the early-twentieth-century institutional economics are not the new institutionalist economists but economic sociologists (Rutherford 1994). The lack of exchange between sociologists interested in economic topics and sociologically minded economists calls to mind Abbott's analysis of the failed efforts of historical sociologists and sociologically inclined historians to collaborate across disciplinary lines since the 1970s: beginning from different starting points, it turned out that those interested in sociological explanations for historical change and those looking for quantitative understandings of social history had little in common (Abbott 2001). Similarly, economists looking for economic solutions to sociological problems may have little in common with sociologists seeking sociological explanations to economic problems.

"Economy" versus "Society": Ideological Perspectives in an Age of Neoliberalism

If we view matters on the disciplinary stage, this contest between economics and sociology appears to be one over scholarly turf. If, on the other hand, we see the dispute within a wider setting of changing political discourse, we can perceive a far more consequential battle between two competing social perspectives. In this sense, each discipline embodies a different master concept that potentially has strikingly different ideological implications. For economists, the master concept is the economy, understood as an autonomous social sphere with its own particular rules. Methodologically individualist and socially nominalist, economists posit rationally calculating actors; society exists for economists only as an aggregate of individual decisions. For sociologists, the master concept is society; sociologists study the shared cultural values and interests of particular groups; sociologists are by comparison social realists who believe that collectivities are genuine and exert an independent influence on individual behavior.

Differences between the two perspectives became increasingly clear during the 1970s as the two disciplines drifted apart ideologically as well as professionally. Such differences were increasingly referred to in distinguishing the two disciplines by sociologists, if not by economists. On the whole, beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, ideas from economics increasingly promoted free market conservatism while sociological ideas were increasingly used to bolster movements for social justice. Of course, not all economists are free market conservatives and not all sociologists are leftists. However, polling data from this period do reveal that sociologists as a whole are significantly to the left of economists on a variety of issues (McFalls, Engle, and Gallagher 1999; Whaples 2009). Even understood in terms of political party affiliation, which poorly matches the range of political views held by sociologists today, a recent survey finds that the ratio of Democratic to Republican affiliation is 2.8:1 among economists and 44:1 among sociologists, by far the highest ratio among the social sciences (Cardiff and Klein 2004).

The larger question, however, has less to do with individual affiliations than with the political uses to which economic and sociological ideas have been put in recent decades. Beginning in the 1970s, economic ideas were increasingly used to support a free market conservatism that promoted political policies such as government deregulation, the partial dismantling of the New Deal welfare state, and neoliberal free trade policies (Harvey 2005). Roger Backhouse (2005) correctly notes that analyzing the contribution of economics to this larger political development is complex. One can certainly point to prominent examples of groups of economists who explicitly sought to contribute to free market conservatism: most notably, the Austrian economists led by Friedrich Hayek, who had decried the welfare state since the 1930s but whose views became increasingly acceptable in mainstream political discourse after 1970, and the Chicago school of economics, which contributed directly to the adoption of neoliberal free trade policies in Latin America, most famously in Chile. Think tanks promoting neoliberal ideas in the United States and Britain drew heavily on these economic ideas (Backhouse 2009; Cockett 1995). The more important point, however, concerns a shift in the mainstream of the economics profession. While most professional economists were not all-out neoliberals, the discipline as a whole did became increasingly skeptical of state-oriented solutions in favor of market-based solutions. Regardless of individual economists' personal political preferences and notable examples of prominent liberal economists such as Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, most economists increasingly saw the social world from the perspective of the marketplace, a tendency inherent in the discipline from its inception, but enhanced by a growing opposition both within the discipline and in society at large to large-scale government regulation of the economy.

During the third quarter of the twentieth century, economists often viewed their discipline as providing a set of tools that policymakers could use to manipulate economic performance. To this degree, economists were content to leave the discussion of other social issues to other disciplines, but in any case their commitment to post–New Deal goals of economic growth and full employment jibed well with the liberal politics prevailing in other social scientific disciplines. In the post-1968 period, the public counterpart to the willingness of many economists to explain sociological issues in economic terms was to deny the primacy of the social or even the very existence of society. If many professional economists were careful to state that their assumptions of rational actors were methodological, it was left to politicians and others to take economics as a description of the good society. Influenced by the right turn in economics, it was no less a politician than Margaret Thatcher who declared in a 1987 interview disavowing the government's responsibility for social welfare, "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" (quoted in Cockett 1995).

Economists are very reluctant to define their discipline in explicitly ideological terms; rather, most conceive of their discipline as an objective, ideologically neutral science. This is in sharp contrast to sociologists, many of whom have been eager to distinguish their field from economics in explicitly ideological terms. This suggests that a key difference between the fields lies not just in the potential ideological discrepancies of their perspectives but also in the degrees to which practitioners in the two disciplines see their ideas as having political meanings. In contrast to economics, sociology was deeply transformed by the social movements of the 1960s as evident in a new openness to Marxist approaches that was absent in economics, where the political spectrum more closely mirrored the mainstream of American party politics. Sociology also became a much more demographically diverse discipline in terms of race, gender, and political ideology and thus, unlike economics, was part of the "dynamics of inclusion" that so profoundly affected the humanities in the United States during the same period (Hollinger 2006; Platt 2010). Issues of patriarchy and racism loomed large as topics within sociology, receiving, with a few prominent exceptions, significantly less attention within economics.

In 2004 the ASA elected a Marxist, Michael Burawoy, on a platform of promoting "public sociology." In his presidential address, Burawoy (2005, 24) explicitly articulated a sharp distinction between the political implications of the disciplines of economics and sociology: "If the standpoint of economics is the market and its expansion, and the standpoint of political science is the state and the guarantee of political stability, then the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity." Burawoy even drew a wider principle from the differences between pluralized sociology and a more unified economics, comparing the strong discipline and consensus of economics to the Communist Party while likening sociology to "Anarcho-Syndicalism, a decentralized participatory democracy" (23). To be sure, many sociologists disagreed with Burawoy's ideological perspective, and both disciplines contained scholars of diverse political views. Nevertheless, there was a marked difference between the two disciplines' influence on public discourse. Notably, the increased ideological diversity of the social sciences after 1968 meant that challenges to social scientific work that advanced mainstream political values were voiced not in terms of a "classical" alternative but in terms of those disciplines that now appeared most hospitable to such alternatives. If C. Wright Mills, a pariah among disciplinary leaders at the time of his early death in 1962, had lived longer, it is easy to imagine that he would have been elected president of the ASA.

An examination of presidents of the AEA and the ASA from 2000 to 2009 clearly illustrates the ideological differences between the two disciplines. Of course, those elected to such positions are not wholly representative of the diverse memberships of their disciplines. Nevertheless, the fact that certain kinds of scholars are elected to such posts is a good indication of the kind of disciplinary identity that the majority identify with. Judging from their biographical statements posted on the ASA Web site, all ten of the most recent presidents of the ASA consider their work as making a contribution of one sort or another to movements for social justice. At least four of these (Patricia Hill Collins, Frances Fox Piven, Burawoy, and Troy Duster) can be considered radicals by the standards of mainstream American political discourse. This is in sharp contrast to economists, where the left wing of the discipline is occupied not by radicals but by liberal Democrats such as Krugman and Stiglitz. Four of the ASA presidents have been women, and two have been African American. In contrast, all ten past presidents of the AEA are men; nine of them white, and one Indian American. None can be considered to have any relationship to movements for social justice. There is also a marked difference in how the past presidents of each association conceive of their relationship to society. In contrast to presidents of the ASA, all of whom describe their contributions to the discipline partly in terms of "taking a stand" on public issues, presidents of the AEA have been recognized for their outstanding technical achievements.[2] Too much should not be made of these differences between past presidents of professional societies; for example, a comparison of recent issues of the leading professional journals in the two fields would undoubtedly reveal greater similarities than this measure suggests. Nevertheless, it is striking that the scholars sociologists have elected to represent them are so willing to openly identify themselves with a broadly left-wing struggle for social justice, in sharp contrast to their counterparts in economics.

Conclusion

This essay has provided a model of ways to conceive of the relationship between sociology and economics and sketched how the categories developed here might be used to understand the history of their relationship in the post-1945 United States. It suggests that there is no single answer to the question of what distinguishes social scientific disciplines from one another. At any moment in the period from 1945 to the present, one could find examples of all of the four categories I have discussed. In some sense, all four possibilities are embedded in the fields of economics and sociology as they have taken shape since the late nineteenth century. However, I have emphasized that the boundaries between disciplines are constantly shifting in response to changed historical circumstances. While a diversity of ways to conceive the relationship has been a marked feature of the entire period, there was a definite shift from complementary conceptions (professional and classical) in the 1945–68 period to competitive understandings (border disputes and economy vs. society) in the period thereafter. How distinctions between such scholarly fields are understood, both within disciplines and in their public forms, is far from an idle question of definition, but rather is vital to the kinds of work that social scientists do and the kinds of values their work promotes in society at large. Such self-

2. The past ten presidents of the ASA from 2000 to 2009 in chronological order: Joe R. Feagin, Douglas S. Massey, Barbara F. Reskin, William T. Bielby, Michael Burawoy, Troy Duster, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Frances Fox Piven, Arne L. Kalleberg, Patricia Hill Collins. The same for the AEA: Dale W. Jorgensen, Sherwin Rosen, Robert E. Lucas Jr., Peter A. Diamond, Martin Feldstein, Daniel McFadden, George A. Akerlof, Thomas J. Sargent, Avinash K. Dixit, Robert Hall. See www.asanet.org/about/pastpresidentsalphalist.cfm for a list of past presidents of the ASA and autobiographical statements by each; see www.vanderbilt.edu/AEA/officerspast.htm for a listing of past presidents of the AEA.

understandings point to the larger significance of similarities and differences among the disciplines. In their proper eagerness to transcend the restrictive focus on disciplines that has too often characterized the history of the social sciences, scholars should not forget the centrality of disciplines. Indeed, a comparative history of social scientific disciplines, along with an understanding of cross-disciplinary ventures, can help us understand that the disciplinary structures in place today are not natural developments but products of history.

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