

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



*Engineering Society: The Scientization of the Social in Comparative Perspective, 1880 – 1990.* Sheffield, UK: German Historical Institute London, German Historical Institute Washington DC, German History Society, and the Department of History, University of Sheffield, 20.11.2008-22.11.2008.

**Reviewed by** Jochen F. Mayer

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2009)

## **Engineering Society: The Scientization of the Social in Comparative Perspective, 1880 –1990**

This international conference was dedicated to the analysis of the application of social sciences to social problems. The Douglas Knoop Centre at the University of Sheffield provided the appropriate meeting space for a wide-ranging program consisting of three panels on: Social and Penal Policy; Diagnosis and Therapy; and Organizations, Polling and Marketing. The interdisciplinary contributions centered on the manifold ways in which applied social sciences (above all legal and statistical knowledge, neurosciences, psychology, polling, market research, and organizational research) have classified social phenomena, described abnormal situations, defined social problems, provided blueprints for possible solutions, and called for therapeutic intervention in the lives of individuals. Thus, the scientization of the social aimed at shedding light on both the scientific self-descriptions and the structures of modern western societies since the late nineteenth century.

LUTZ RAPHAEL (Trier) public keynote lecture argued in favour of a methodological pluralism in examining the scientization of societies over space and time. The different discourse cycles that characterized this process should not only be described, but also examined in terms of their effects and consequences. Raphael advocated research that does not restrict itself to examining expert knowledge, but also takes into account the role of clients, sponsors, and resistance. Further, he stressed the need to develop a cogent periodization of the scientization of the social that would pay attention to different

discourse levels and antagonistic positions in the fields of knowledge.

The first panel was devoted to the interface of knowledge and society in the field of social and penal policy. PETER BECKER (Linz) paper critically examined the recent rise of neurochemical explanations of violence in criminological debates. Becker considered the appeal of the neurosciences to lie in their promise, first, to establish a causal link between violent behavior and specific pathologies of the brain, and second to redress undesirable behavior by individualized interventions into neurochemical processes in the offender's brain. Becker went on to analyze how neuroscientists were able to translate their scientific authority for the purpose of political and public debates, arguing that newspapers played a key role in integrating the neurosciences into public discourse.

JULIA MOSES (Oxford) analyzed the emergence of workplace accident insurance legislation in Germany, Britain, and Italy between 1880 and 1920. The social sciences, namely statistical ways of thinking about workplace accidents, she argued, were a crucial catalyst in the evolution of this new framework. Statistics suggested that industrial accidents were the product of workplace risk rather than individual actions for which workers or employers could be held personally responsible. Moses emphasised that once the respective compensation laws in each country had been adopted, expertise from medicine and the natural sciences became espe-

cially important for defining the scope of these laws. After the First World War, specific governmental structures and compensation cultures gained importance at the expense of transnational expertise networks.

MARTIN LENGWILER (Basel) emphasized the importance of transnational exchange on social insurance in his paper on international organisations and the convergence of welfare states in the twentieth century. Lengwiler's main interest lay in exploring the extent to which universalistic expert knowledge was able to define social policy models in Britain, France, Germany, and Switzerland. Therefore, he closely examined the International Labour Office (ILO, 1919-1970) and the International Congress of Actuaries (1895-1951). Lengwiler argued that such international expert bodies were very successful in defining international technical standards of national welfare systems, but were unable to bring about convergence in insurance legislation and regulation due to national institutional obstacles and national antagonisms.

TED PORTER (Los Angeles) investigated the engineering of society with particular attention to statistical knowledge. As the form of social investigation that was most conscious of its methods, statistics contributed considerably to the hardening of the sciences during the late nineteenth century in a transnational context. The example of economic ideas and econometrics in the twentieth century also illustrated how statistical investigation gave a new specificity and concreteness to the notion of the economy across national and ideological differences. For the measurement of gross domestic product, for example, statistical efforts were closely allied with economic management and involved government along with university economics. Most importantly, from this perspective, the free market and the state were not simply in opposition, but have been refashioned, each by the other, by the distinct representations of statistical measurement and cost-benefit analysis.

RICHARD WETZELL (Washington) noted in his comment that both the rise of social insurance (Moses) and the penal reform movement associated with biological explanations of crime (Becker) were characterized by a shift from individual responsibility to risk and dangerousness. This shift, he argued, was undoubtedly due to the impact of the social and human sciences on social policy, but was also connected to transformations in the image of man - from viewing people as rational and autonomous individuals to viewing them as products of

biological and social forces. Wetzell also addressed the theme of experts transgressing their disciplinary boundaries in order to make pronouncements on social and political issues - such as neuroscientists offering solutions to the crime problem. Raising the question of why society accepted the interventions of experts beyond their field of expertise, Wetzell suggested that experts might have offered a welcome opportunity to replace genuinely political debate with supposedly apolitical expert opinion.

The second panel explored the relationship between individual and society by focusing on diagnosis and therapy. ELIZABETH LUNBECK (Vanderbilt, Nashville) investigated how narcissism became a category used by American social critics by the mid-1970s. As a peculiar convergence of two distinct discursive topoi - of public intellectuals and of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists - narcissism and the narcissist became leading actors in the then popular dramas of cultural critics. Yet Lunbeck pointed to the inherent paradox that the category first coalesced as a clinical phenomenon not in the abundance of the late-twentieth-century America, but in the deprived circumstances of World War I Vienna and Budapest. Here, Lunbeck identified a conflation of the two opposed analytical traditions - respectively organized around privation and gratification - into one that celebrated release and abundance.

MATHEW THOMPSON (Warwick) critically assessed psychology and the engineering of society in twentieth-century Britain and questioned the idea that psychology provided an authority and set of tools for the shaping of society. He argued that such psycho-eugenic forms of social engineering must be regarded in the light of a history of both ambition and practical achievements. The effects of opinion surveys as a tool of social psychology in the context of war propaganda, for example, have to be evaluated against the backdrop of historical opportunities, disciplinary struggles, and the promise of a popularization of professional psychological knowledge. Likewise, with regard to psychology as an applied social science, its relative underdevelopment and scarce therapeutic resources made the relative success in education via mental testing an exception.

HARRY OOSTERHUIS (Maastricht) paper examined the link between democratization and the psychologization of citizenship, illustrated by the development of mental health care in the Netherlands (1870-2005). On the basis of four different ideals of self-development, Oosterhuis argued that psychiatrists, psycho-hygienists,

and other mental health workers were clearly involved in the liberal-democratic project of promoting not only productive, responsible, and adaptive citizens, but also autonomous, self-conscious, and emancipated individuals as members of a democratic society. This account is particularly valid for the pillarized Dutch social system, which witnessed a major shift from the ideal of adaptation to existing values and norms (character) to that of individual self-development (personality) after the Second World War.

KATHARIN NORRIS (American University, Washington DC) explored scientific child psychology and healthy child development in the French Third Republic (1870–1940) as an emblematic moment for the co-construction of the nascent social sciences and modern social policies. Retracing debates among psychiatrists, criminologists, philosophers, and educators revealed competing scientific stances towards the working of the child's mind as the key to devising effective curricula, cultivating loyal citizens, and ensuring healthy families. Thus, according to Norris, the interrelated discussions of lying, suggestibility, and the origins of child psychology not only illustrated the establishment of child psychology as a discipline, but also became a touchstone for public debates about the republic's future.

In her comment on the second panel, SABINE MAASEN (Basel), a sociologist of science, mentioned several important theoretical issues from a Foucauldian perspective. From this point of view, she missed both the technological aspect of how scientific knowledge is translated and made effective (e.g. through therapeutic action) and, consequently, the question of how a neo-social subject is formed as simultaneously being responsible for oneself and the society.

The third panel examined the evolution of applied social sciences in the field of business organisations, polling, and marketing and was opened by ANJA KRÜKE (Ebert Foundation, Bonn) who explored the development of polling as the epitome of democratic science in West Germany (1940s to 1980s). For the 1960s, she identified a situation of mutual benefit to political parties and pollsters in their attempt to investigate the chances of political approval from non-voters or floating voters. Following the idea of a transparent market, the electorate was placed under scrutiny. Also, looping cycles between polling categories and self-descriptions led both to contingent interpretations of the electorate's rationalities and to a self-perception of the people as a population and a normal feature of the public sphere.

KERSTIN BRÄCKWEH (London) was interested in how market research and social classification were supposed to streamline the diverse British society. Acknowledging the multiple meanings of 'social class,' Bräckweh focused on the usage of 'class' as a statistical categorization put forward and widely used by applied social sciences. A brief genealogy of official social classifications revealed that the ways of classifying people in Britain were based on measurements of employment and remained unchanged over decades despite significant changes in society: it was not before the census of 2001 that the old model of 1911 and the 'socio-economic groups' of the 1950s were merged into one new official system. That market researchers have decided to draw on these inflexible official classifications for their own 'social grades' is a puzzling historical fact that Bräckweh explained by reference to cost-efficiency, accordance to accepted British self-descriptions as well as the relative proximity of early market researchers to governmental social scientists.

EMIL WALTER-BUSCH (St. Gallen) concentrated on the often forgotten history of specific sub-disciplines of the applied social sciences, i.e. industrial psychology, industrial relations research, and market and public opinion research (1900–1950). He highlighted the puzzling fact that these fields had a remarkable career in the U.S., whereas only industrial psychology gained ground in Switzerland. Busch (University of St. Gallen) found the reason for this in a suspicious stance towards academia and intellectualism in Switzerland, which prevented the establishment of private foundations that were so important in the U.S. for the promotion of the social sciences in general (e.g. the commitment of J.D. Rockefeller jun. during 1920s–1960s).

STEFAN SCHWARZKOPF (London) investigated the emergence, since the 1930s, of market research innovations that coincided with the popularization of the Austrian School of Economics and thus helped to forge the imagination of the marketplace as a 'democracy of goods' or a 'consumer democracy.' The 'consumer-citizen equation' proved to be a powerful myth for legitimizing mass consumption and the 'free' market in Western democracies. Schwarzkopf argued that the scientization of market-research tools through consumer interviews, panel surveys, and product testing panels helped to project the marketplace as the new agora and to install the consumer as the new sovereign. Here, the 'consumer jury' symbolically aligned the act of voting with the act of consumer choice.

FELIX KELLER (Zürich) highlighted in his comment on the third panel the often forgotten role of machines in the processes of scientization and their interaction with symbolic languages (of the social sciences), that is, the importance of algorithms for multivariate analysis. He characterised the applied side of the social sciences as one that has shaken off epistemological reflections, adding that they seem to be constitutive for university-based research, but negligible for market research or web-based quick polling.

The concluding discussion, introduced by DIRK SCHUMANN (Göttingen), reflected upon several conceptual omissions that would need to be taken up or clarified for further research. First, the question of what an expert is remained unclear. Is the expert a public figure with access to mass media, an authoritative figure whose social position is constituted by a transgression of disciplinary boundaries or a practitioner of certain fields of knowledge (e.g. nurses and social workers)? Second, it was noted that the categories of gender and race were absent from most contributions. This omission meant that the issue of the dominance of male experts and the importance of the colonial Other for the constitution of distinctly Western legal-political concepts (e.g. citizenship) as well as scientific and social ideas were neglected. A third prominent omission was the history of emotions, which is the issue of how particular emotional regimes interacted with processes of scientization (for instance, parents' anxieties for their children and home-based security in the U.S.). Finally, there was unanimity that it is futile to draw a distinction between pure and applied (social) sciences because a science effect is most tangible through a mixture of scientific and popular knowledge. Nevertheless, a conceptual distinction between the history of scientization and that of popularisation/vulgarisation was considered heuristically useful. The organizers plan to publish a volume of essays based on the conference.

### Conference Overview:

Introduction: Kerstin Bräckweh/Benjamin Ziemann

Public Keynote Lecture: Lutz Raphael (University of Trier): Experts, Ideas and Institutions: Main Trends in Embedding the Human Sciences in Western Societies since the 1880s.

Panel 1: Social and Penal Policy (Chair: Kerstin Bräckweh)

Peter Becker (University of Linz): New Members of the Research Family? Neurosciences and their Presence in Criminological Debates.

Bengt Sandin (University of Linköping): Abortion Crimes, Social Engineering of Sexuality and Welfare Policy in Sweden 1860-1960.

Julia Moses (Oxford University): Compensation and Legal and Scientific Expertise about Workplace Accidents, 1880-1920.

Martin Lengwiler (University of Basel): From Standards to Co-ordination: Universalism, International Organisations and the Limited Convergence of Welfare States in the 20th Century.

Ted Porter (UCLA): How Society Became Statistical

Commentator: Richard Wetzell (German Historical Institute, Washington DC)

Panel 2: Diagnosis and Therapy (Chair: Dirk Schuman)

Elizabeth Lunbeck (Vanderbilt University): Narcissism as Social Critique.

Mathew Thomson (University of Warwick): Psychology and the Engineering of Society in Twentieth-Century Britain.

Harry Oosterhuis (University of Maastricht): Self-Development and Civic Virtue: Psychiatry, Mental Health, and Citizenship in the Netherlands (1870-2005).

Katharine Norris (American University, Washington DC): Scientific Child Psychology and Healthy Child Development in the French Third Republic, 1870-1940.

Commentator: Sabine Maasen (University of Basel)

Panel 3: Organizations, Polling and Marketing (Chair: Richard Wetzell)

Anja Kruke (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Bonn): Polls in Politics. Restructuring the Body Politic in West Germany, 1940s to 1980s.

Kerstin Bräckweh (German Historical Institute London): How to Streamline a Diverse Society: Market Research and Social Classification in Britain.

Emil Walter-Busch (University of St Gallen): Business Organisations, Foundations, and the State as Promoters of Applied Social Sciences in the USA and Switzerland, 1900-1950.

Stefan Schwarzkopf (Queen Mary, London): The  
Consumer Jury: Historical Origins, Theoretical Impli-  
cations and Social Consequences of a Marketing Myth.

Commentator: Felix Keller (University of Zürich)  
Thematic Wrap-Up and Final Discussion, chaired by  
Dirk Schumann and Richard Wetzell

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Jochen F. Mayer. Review of , *Engineering Society: The Scientization of the Social in Comparative Perspective, 1880 – 1990*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29124>

Copyright © 2009 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.