

## Suspicious Brothers: Reflections on Political History and Social Sciences

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cavazza, S. (2017). Suspicious Brothers: Reflections on Political History and Social Sciences. *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, spec., 53-63. <https://doi.org/10.1412/87619>

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## Suspicious Brothers: Reflections on Political History and Social Sciences

### Abstract

*This article analyses the relationship between history and the social sciences. Historians and social scientists were long regarded as separate or even opposite in their methodological and analytical approaches. The opening of the historians' ranks towards the social sciences became strongly apparent between the two world wars when the group of historians associated with the journal «Les Annales» set out to replace the «traditionally oriented narrative of events» by a «problem-oriented analytical history». The 1980s were also the time when the «linguistic turn» spread to the historical studies, paving the way for cooperation with other subjects, but also complicating relations with some sectors of the social sciences. Social and political phenomena have a historical dimension which needs to be reckoned with. Collaboration presupposes recognising the respective scientific premises, and not falling into methodological monism.*

Keywords: *Political History, Social Sciences, Historiography, Conceptual History.*

### 1. Background to a relationship

For a long time the relationship between history and social science remained a complex one, although many scholars saw the mutual advantages. Philip Abrams used to point out that history and sociology had a common purpose, «to understand the puzzle of human agency and both seek to do so in terms of the process of social structuring»<sup>1</sup>. Charles Tilly insisted there were many «reasons for thinking that explanatory political science can hardly get anywhere without relying on careful historical analysis»<sup>2</sup>, while political science believes in dialogue: «Politics is about who gets what, when and how [...] Political history is about who got what, when and how»<sup>3</sup>. Useful though history is for our understanding of politics, it has periodically

*My thanks to Asher Colombo, Fulvio Cammarano and Donatella Campus for reading the paper and discussing it with me.*

<sup>1</sup> Ph. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1994<sup>4</sup>, p. X.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. Tilly, *Why and How History Matters*, in R.E. Goodin, Ch. Tilly (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2006, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup> I. McLean, *Political Science and History: Friends and Neighbours*, in «Political Studies», 58 (2010), pp. 355.

been questioned on various grounds: the alleged limitations of history's linear time-frame<sup>4</sup>, or its excessive indulgence in qualitative analysis at odds with the quantitative standards of social science. Historians and social scientists were long regarded as separate or even opposite in their methodological and analytical approaches. The latter tended to regard the former as mere accumulators of historical sources telling tales devoid of theoretical awareness; they in turn were seen as abstruse theoreticians making abstract generalizations regardless of any context or empirical practice<sup>5</sup>. To Peter Burke both positions were alike guilty of «anachronism» since in the first case historians were branded as stuck in the Rankean model, while in the second social scientists were allegedly still shackled to Auguste Comte<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, however, there have been difficulties of communication partly for epistemological reasons and partly due to the way scientific communities grew up. Across the turn of the nineteenth century the disciplines began to get institutionalised and professionalised as rules and methods became codified, while professional associations and chairs were established to pass on learning and promote research. The founding of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1903 is a good example of that process: in that instance the political scientist was «understood as pursuing a field of study distinct from that of the “historian”, “economist” or “sociologist”»<sup>7</sup>. Specialisation and professionalization brought efficiency to the individual disciplines, but complicated dialogue among them. For some the process meant embracing a scientific and positivistic position<sup>8</sup>. In the case of American political science, the search for disciplinary status called for skill in problem solving and prediction: «being “scientific” entailed the search for more observable and measurable data, hypothesis testing, model building and, eventually, predictability»<sup>9</sup>. This formed a kind of alternating current in the dialogue between history and social science, though the various disciplines did occasionally benefit from cross-fertilization. Max Weber is a clear example, interlacing as he did history and theory, or history and sociology. This influenced later schools of research such as the *neue Sozialgeschichte* and even the viewpoint of the historians researching into political history around «Ricerche di storia politica»<sup>10</sup>.

The opening of the historians' ranks towards social science became strongly apparent between the two world wars when the group of historians associated with the journal

<sup>4</sup> A. Norton, *Politics against History: Temporal Distortions in the Study of Politics*, in «Political Studies», 58 (2010), pp. 340-353.

<sup>5</sup> P. Burke, *History and Social Theory*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3. On Ranke and his followers, see the recent work by G. Iggers, *The Intellectual Foundations of Nineteenth-Century ‘Scientific’ History: The German Model*, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. IV, *Historical Writing 1800-1945*, edited by S. Macintyre, J. Maiguashca, and A. Pók, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2011, pp. 59-77.

<sup>7</sup> R. Adcock, *The Emergence of Political Science as a Discipline: History and the Study of Politics in America, 1875-1910*, in «History of Political Thought», 24 (2003), p. 482.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. Fleck, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences. Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research*, London, Bloomsbury, 2011, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> D. Kavanagh, *Why Political Science Needs History*, in «Political Studies», 39 (1991), p. 480.

<sup>10</sup> P. Pombeni, *Partiti e sistemi politici nella storia contemporanea (1830-1969)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1994 and Id., *Introduction à l'histoire des partis politiques*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1992.

«Annales»<sup>11</sup> set out to replace the «traditionally oriented narrative of events» by a «problem-oriented analytical history», and «a mainly political history» by a «history of the whole range of human activities»<sup>12</sup>. In the United States, dialogue with the social sciences paved the way for the postwar *new political history*, in which the historical study of politics went in for quantitative methods, especially when it came to analysing electoral behaviour patterns<sup>13</sup>. The 1960s saw the beginnings of historical sociology, a branch in which even a generalising approach to studying society made use of a historical viewpoint. This was certainly the case with those exponents of historical sociology who cross-checked with history from numerous angles – like the already mentioned Charles Tilly or Theda Skocpol<sup>14</sup> – or the school of policy history studies<sup>15</sup>. History was also a fertile source for scholars studying modernisation issues in search of useful ideas for promoting development in countries outside Europe and North America<sup>16</sup>. But it was above all in the 1970s that the dialogue stepped up between history and social science and both camps seemingly came to share certain basic assumptions as to social evolution<sup>17</sup>. Historians here began to take an increasing interest in analysing society and its dynamics, expressing a preference for social history over political history. Such was the drift of the *neue Sozialgeschichte* which picked up ideas and methods from the social sciences, borrowing Ideal-types (*Idealtypen*) from Weberian sociology and connecting up with the theories of modernisation<sup>18</sup>.

Even within the *Annales* tradition – always rather critical of political history – the same decade saw a renewed interest in politics to the extent of admitting the importance of studying the forms in which power is represented and wielded. The intention was to restore legitimacy to a new brand of political history «dedicated to structures, social analysis, semeiology and the study of power», albeit nicely distinct from traditional political history and the traditional objects thereof<sup>19</sup>. But a new lease of life affecting political history opened when social history in the Anglo-Saxon world and *Sozialgeschichte* in Germany shifted their sights from individuals to structures and a bottom-up approach to history<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> M. Bloch, L. Febvre, *À nos lecteurs*, in «Annales d'histoire économique et sociale», 1 (1929), pp. 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School 1929-1989*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ph.R. Vandermeer, *The New Political History: Progress and Prospects*, in «Computers and the Humanities», 11 (1978), pp. 265-278.

<sup>14</sup> Th. Skocpol (ed.), *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> J. Zelizer, *Clio's Lost Tribe: Public Policy History Since 1978*, in «Journal of Policy History», 12 (2000), pp. 369-394.

<sup>16</sup> N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future. Modernisation Theory in Cold War America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2003, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> K. Passmore, *History and Social Science in the West*, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. V, *Historical Writing since 1945*, edited by A. Schneider, D. Woolf, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2011, p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> K. Nathaus, *Sozialgeschichte und Historische Sozialwissenschaft*, version 1.0, in *Doku-pedia, Zeitgeschichte*, 24.9.2012, [http://docupedia.de/zg/nathaus\\_sozialgeschichte\\_v1\\_de\\_2012](http://docupedia.de/zg/nathaus_sozialgeschichte_v1_de_2012) (retrieved 24 April 2017), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> J. Le Goff, *Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?*, in «Daedalus», 100 (1971), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Th. Welskopp, *Die Sozialgeschichte der Väter. Grenzen und Perspektiven der historischen Sozialwissenschaft*, in «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», 24 (1998), pp. 173-198.

In the 1980s British research into movements and classes actually broadened the scope of political history and led to a rapprochement between high politics and politics from below<sup>21</sup>. This was the period when «Ricerche di storia politica» came on the scene, a group of scholars bent on transcending the limits of traditional political history who abandoned the identity-based approach to studying parties and analysed them as organisational structures, using Ideal-types to perform comparisons and seeking tie-ups with international research<sup>22</sup>.

For historians the 1980s were also the time when the «linguistic turn» spread to history studies, paving the way for cooperation with other subjects, but also complicating relations with some sectors of social science. The linguistic turn prompted historians to analyse discourse and open up to other disciplines like linguistics, philosophy and semeiotics; by contrast, sociology and political science – at least their mainstream – kept their distance from these new fields of interest, even though some areas of social science (e.g. sociology) were profoundly affected by the new trend<sup>23</sup>.

In the framework of this historical development my paper will offer some thoughts on the relationship between political history and social science, after a few preliminary observations. The first concerns the concept of social science itself: in the history of the social sciences this generally includes sociology, anthropology, economics, political science<sup>24</sup>, and sometimes also takes in psychology, human geography and statistics<sup>25</sup>. Historians in general have had dealings with all these subjects, with an emphasis on sociology and anthropology, while political historians also tie up with political science. The relationship with economics – which was very strong in the past, as the foundation of the *Annales* school has shown – has tended to fade, partly with the bias of the subject towards econometrics, and partly owing to the culturalist turn in progress among historians these last few decades<sup>26</sup>. By social science, therefore, the present paper will mean sociology, political science and anthropology.

The second point regards a relapsing mistrust of political history, despite the great changes that have taken place inside it. The mistrust translates into three main criticisms: its being largely narrative history, its concern solely with «great men», and more recently, its penchant for studying traditional objects (parties, parliaments, institutions), making it low on innovation. On the first criticism, the narrative style of history is not peculiar to political history,

<sup>21</sup> S. Perderson, *What is Political History Now?*, in D. Cannadine (ed.), *What is History Now?*, London, Palgrave, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> See the papers by M. Colin, L. Riberi and P. Pombeni to mark the tenth anniversary of the journal, and especially P. Pombeni, *La storiografia politica sull'Italia (1985-1995)*, in «Ricerche di storia politica», 10 (1996), pp. 79-106.

<sup>23</sup> On the connection between the linguistic turn and social science, see for instance Th. Childers, *Political Sociology and the "Linguistic Turn"*, in «Central European History» 22 (1989), pp. 381-393, H. Paget, *After the Linguistic and Multicultural Turns*, in «Sociological Forum», 10 (1995), pp. 633-652; I.B. Neumann, *Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy*, in «Millennium: Journal of International Studies», 31 (2002), pp. 627-651.

<sup>24</sup> R.E. Backhouse, P. Fontaine (eds.), *The History of the Social Sciences since 1945*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> T.M. Porter, D. Ross (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Science*, Vol. 7, *The Modern Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> W.H. Sewell Jr., *A Strange Career: The Historical Study of Economic Life*, in «History and Theory», 49 (2010), pp. 146-166.

but a feature of history in general which social science regards as a limitation<sup>27</sup>. In the second place, using a narrative method of displaying results – differing widely in form, as this does, according to the brand of history writing – does not rule out analysis or imply absence of theoretical assumptions, as we shall see later. On the second criticism, the idea that «great men» make history is quite outmoded<sup>28</sup>: nowadays members of the elites are studied for their interaction with society and with other agents, as well as from the angle of gender differences. As for criticism of the objects of study, firstly political history has actually broadened the gamut of objects investigated, for example by exploring political rituals helped by the insights of anthropology, political sociology and social history; and the problem is not so much the objects that are studied, but the way they are studied and the research questions they are called to answer. This actually softens the true underlying criticism, namely, that political history tends to take one or two countries as its framework since parties and parliaments are connected to a state set-up. Criticism of the nation-State as an object for political history ties up with a more general charge made against recent history studies and their tendency to go in for a global dimension of history<sup>29</sup>. On this point all one can say is that recognising global influences does not imply that other scales of analysis are inferior<sup>30</sup>. Once again, awareness of transference and transnational influences must *inform* the study of politics within national or local settings, rather than eclipse it. While admitting that, within the medley of current historical approaches<sup>31</sup>, some individual scholars and works may be open to this charge, political history has actually gone through an undoubted face-lift in the last few years in terms of the objects studied and the methods it uses. In this regeneration the group comprising «Ricerche di storia politica» (which celebrates its thirtieth anniversary with this special issue) have played their part precisely through their readiness to seek interdisciplinary interlocutors. Just how deeply this renewal has affected individual cases of national historiography<sup>32</sup> and how much the innovative contributions of recent years have penetrated international circuits of discussion, is another matter and one that lies outside the bounds of this paper.

<sup>27</sup> Criticism of the narrative style of political history as opposed to an approach based on structures has been levelled by many social historians beginning with the *Annales* school. In Lawrence Stone's late 1970s classification political historians figured among the group of «old narrative historians»: L. Stone, *The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History*, in «Past & Present», 85 (1979), p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> This criticism was again voiced by the *Annales* and by the new social history.

<sup>29</sup> For a panorama of global history see D. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History. Theories and Approaches in a Connected World*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> The usefulness of employing diverse scales of analysis – with due awareness of the limitations – has re-emerged from the methodological debate on comparison: Ph. Levine, *Is Comparative History Possible?*, in «History and Theory», 53 (2014), pp. 331-347; M. Werner, B. Zimmermann, *Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity*, in «History and Theory», 45 (2006), pp. 30-50.

<sup>31</sup> «Historians so often and so visibly disagree with one another. We relish revisionism and distrust orthodoxy, not least because were we to do otherwise, we might put ourselves out of business» (J.L. Gaddis, *Landscape of History. How Historians Map the Past*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002, p. 9).

<sup>32</sup> R. Torstendahl, *Thirty-Five Years of Theories in History. Social Science Theories and Philosophy of History in the Scandinavian Debate*, in «Scandinavian Journal of History», 25 (2000), pp. 1-26; G. Noiriel, *Une histoire sociale du politique est-elle possible?*, in «Vingtième Siècle», 24 (1989), pp. 81-96. See the Forum with A. Botti, C. Cornelißen, G. Le Béguec, A. Masoero, R. Vinen: *Lo stato di salute della storia politica: una ricognizione in cinque contesti nazionali*, edited by M. Marchi, in «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 3 (2013), pp. 353-365.



## 2. End of history or historical turn?

«Papa, explique-moi donc à quoi sert l'histoire?» («Tell me Daddy. What is the use of History?») – the question posed by Marc Bloc during the war<sup>33</sup> – would have met with a dismissive answer in recent years. The end of the Cold War seemed to have marked a decline in the importance of history for any understanding of domestic or international politics. Francis Fukuyama's suggestion that history might be at an end seemed to be shifting the plane of analysis towards the present<sup>34</sup>. The fact that American President Bush used the example of Germany and Japan to bolster the prospect of swiftly building democracy in Iraq was another example of using history selectively and out of context in a «presentist» setting<sup>35</sup>. At the same time the decline of political belonging in Europe and the increased mobility of the electorate have added to belief in the predictive power of electoral-polls. This has given an unprecedented boost to the prestige and influence of political science and political sociology. Though historians have cautioned against overestimating their heuristic value<sup>36</sup>, the phenomenon does belong to that «scientisation of the social» whereby social scientists have gained increasing influence as consultants in decision making processes<sup>37</sup>. But at the same time the crisis of representative democracy in Europe and North America with their mushrooming populism and neo-nationalism, and the return to the international and national limelight of religion as a political factor, have highlighted the need to study domestic and international politics as an arena of conflict and not just administrative management of power, as well as the need to do so from a historical angle in order to grasp the dynamics afoot<sup>38</sup>.

Although a sizable part of social science continues to treat the present synchronically using a reductionist analytical model<sup>39</sup> and often treating history as a container of facts out of context to support theory<sup>40</sup>, even in such areas new branches of research have emerged exploring the interdisciplinary collaboration/contamination with history, just as there

<sup>33</sup> M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier de historien*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1949, Eng. trans. *The Historian's Craft*, New York, Vintage, 1953, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, in «The National Interest», 16 (1989), pp. 3-18.

<sup>35</sup> In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2003 President Bush took the reconstruction of democracy in Germany and Japan after World War II as a model for use in Iraq; cf. D.B. Mac Donald, *Thinking History, Fighting Evil: Neoconservatives and the Perils of Analogy in American Politics*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2009, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup> Th. Mergel, *Il sogno della guida razionale. Scienza sociale empirica, democrazia e politica nell'Europa occidentale dopo il 1945*, in «Ricerche di storia politica», 3 (2013), pp. 335-352.

<sup>37</sup> L. Raphael, *Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen als methodische und konzeptionelle Herausforderung für eine Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», 22 (1996), pp. 165-193.

<sup>38</sup> In various countries historians have argued this need in public debate: D. Armitage, *Why politicians need historians*, in «The Guardian», 7 October 2014; A. Carioti, *Avete emarginato la storia. Il Presidente dei contemporaneisti lancia l'allarme «sociologi e politologi non bastano per capire il presente»*, in «La Lettura», a supplement to «Il Corriere della Sera», 19 June 2016, pp. 12-13. On the role of history in understanding the present, see J. Guldi, D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> I am here drawing on J.L. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, cit., pp. 54-56.

<sup>40</sup> P.W. Schroeder, *History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit*, in «International Security», 22, (1997), p. 71.

are scholars reckoning with history in a duly aware manner<sup>41</sup>. An actual *historical turn* may now be glimpsed in the humane and social sciences<sup>42</sup>, marking the importance of the historical setting for our understanding of the present when it comes to studying society, politics<sup>43</sup> and international relations<sup>44</sup>. To be honest, such trends vary in intensity from country to country and are only minority ripples amid the mainstream of the respective scientific communities, if only because of the long-term effect of recruiting and structuring of academic bodies. Yet one can hardly deny that dialogue is on the return<sup>45</sup>. Even within the plurality of historical approaches that marked the turn of the millennium, there were positions in favour of closing the gap between political history and some areas of political science and sociology<sup>46</sup>. But it is chiefly the dialogue with philosophy and political theory that has generated new prospects for political studies, attracting in its wake a number of scholars from a social history background.

One first meeting point has undoubtedly been the analysis of concepts and ideologies. The key references here are Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*<sup>47</sup>, Pierre Rosanvallon's *Histoire du concept politique*<sup>48</sup> and Michael Freeden's morphological analysis of ideologies<sup>49</sup>. From this launching pad there has recently come a renewed interest in political history connected with a change of perspective as the focus has shifted from politics as a set of institutions (parties, gov-

<sup>41</sup> On the importance of history for understanding international relations, see A.J. Williams, A. Hadfield, J.S. Rofer, *International History and International Relations*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> «One of the most distinctive aspects of the current intellectual epoch is a turn toward history that is in progress across the humanities and social sciences in America today [...], an epochal turn against the science of society constituted in part as opposition to history in the immediate post World War Two years» (T.J. Mc Donald, *Introduction*, in Id. (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996, pp. 1-5, quotation p. 1).

<sup>43</sup> See the special issue on the evolution of democracy in «Comparative Political Studies» 43 (2010) and especially G. Capoccia, D. Ziblatt, *The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond*, in «Comparative Political Studies», 43 (2010), pp. 931-968: «Yet as the post-cold war enthusiasm for democracy seemed to ebb in the late 1990s [...], a series of important controversies over historical cases of democratization emerged, leading scholars to ask, what are the appropriate lessons to be learned from Europe's own difficult historical transition to democracy for new democracies today», in *ibidem*, p. 932.

<sup>44</sup> G. Lawson, *The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations*, in «European Journal of International Relations», 18 (2012), pp. 203-226.

<sup>45</sup> D. McCourt, *The Historical Turn and International Relations 'Beyond Objectivism and Relativism'*, EUI Working papers SPS, 2007. Even in Italy, where political scientists' interest in history seems to have dwindled, there has sprung up within the Società italiana di Scienza politica a standing group called «Politics and History» aiming to «boost the development and diffusion of historical political studies, facilitating dialogue between political scientists and historians» (Standing group «Politica e storia» della Società italiana di Scienza politica, in [http://www.sisp.it/files/uploads/SG\\_PoliticaStoria.pdf](http://www.sisp.it/files/uploads/SG_PoliticaStoria.pdf) (retrieved 18 April 2017)).

<sup>46</sup> J. Zelizer, *History and Political Science: Together Again?*, in «Journal of Policy History», 16 (2004), pp. 126-136.

<sup>47</sup> R. Koselleck, *Einleitung*, in O. Brunner, W. Conze, R. Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1972; R. Koselleck (ed.), *Historische Semantik und Begriffsgeschichte*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1979; R. Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien und Semantik der politischen und sozialen Sprachen*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> P. Rosanvallon, *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique (note de travail)*, in «Revue de Synthèse», 110 (1986), pp. 94-105.

<sup>49</sup> M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1998.



ernments, parliaments) to «the political» «as a distinctive form of human communicative activity conducive to establishing a specific sphere, the political sphere»<sup>50</sup>. It is interesting that this resurgence of interest in political history is often coming from scholars who grew up in different schools such as social history<sup>51</sup>. Attention to «the political» as a broad dimension spanning more than the study of parties and organizations forms the new meeting ground for political historians with areas of social science that favour the *qualitative* approach away from the stressful pressure of the *quantitative*. This is the course on which the historians of Bielefeld are set<sup>52</sup>, and likewise (though in a different theoretical context) the exponents of «Ricerche di storia politica».

One example of mutual benefit here lies in the study of populism which has regained interest in the last twenty years with the spreading of political movements and styles answering to the populist description. From a historical standpoint the notion of populism used to be employed to describe certain specific political movements such as the American Populist Party or the Latin American movements. Use of the term in other contexts was somewhat vague from a theoretical point of view<sup>53</sup>. Ever since the 1990s contacts with political theory and political science has tightened the definition – from a historical angle, too –, distinguishing between the ideological matrix and its translation into movements and parties. This has enabled the term to be applied to study of the present and the past. The category of populism has gained greater precision and sophistication with the contributions of scholars from various backgrounds<sup>54</sup> and in this form it has influenced history research<sup>55</sup>. In being taken up by political science and sociology, however, it has required some reworking and adaptation to context. As Gaddis points out, historians use «particular generalisations that are embedded in narratives», of value in the specific case and applicable to other contexts provided they are first validated and are not assumed to have general validity<sup>56</sup>.

A renewed interest in politics can also be found within the ranks of social history under the effect of the linguistic turn and a change in the kind of interlocutors. The role of semeiotics and philosophy seems to have dwindled while that of social and sociological theory is

<sup>50</sup> W. Steinmetz, H.G. Haupt, *The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach*, in W. Steinmetz, I. Gilther-Holtey, H.G. Haupt (eds.), *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt a. M., Campus, 2013, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> See *Forum: The contours of the political*, in «German History», 33 (2015), pp. 255-273.

<sup>52</sup> W. Steinmetz, H.G. Haupt, *The Political as Communicative Space in History*, cit., pp. 21-27.

<sup>53</sup> This position was maintained in P. Diehl, S. Cavazza, *Editorial*, in *Faschismus und Populismus*, in «Totalitarismus und Demokratie», 9 (2012), pp. 207-210.

<sup>54</sup> From the extensive literature on populism I would here cite the most theoretical writings: C. Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in «Government and Opposition», 39 (2004), pp. 541-563; F. Decker (ed.), *Populismus. Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches Korrektiv*, Wiesbaden, VS Verl. für Sozialwiss., 2006, pp. 9-32; K. Priester, *Populismus. Historische und aktuellen Erscheinungsformen*, Frankfurt a. M., Campus, 2007; Y. Meny, Y. Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple. Le populisme et les démocraties*, Paris, Fayard, 2000; E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2007; L. Cedroni, *Die Morphologie des Populismus*, in P. Diehl (ed.), *Populismus: Konzepte und Theorien*, in «Totalitarismus und Demokratie», VIII (2011), pp. 237-250.

<sup>55</sup> See the special issues *Le populisme*, in «Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire», 56 (1997) and *Il populismo: una moda o un concetto?*, edited by L. Zanatta, in «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 3 (2004), pp. 329-334.

<sup>56</sup> J.L. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, cit., p. 62 ff.

on the ascendant<sup>57</sup>. This process may be traced to an attempt to revalue the intentions of agents, at least in part:

Thus practice and meaning have been at least partially uncoupled from the impersonal workings of discursive regimes and rejoined to the active intentions of human agents embedded in social worlds. Rather than being governed by impersonal semiotic codes, historical actors are now seen as engaged in inflecting the semiotic constituents (signs) that shape their understanding of reality so as to craft an experience of that world in terms of a situational sociology of meaning, or what might be called a social semantics<sup>58</sup>.

The focus has thus shifted from semeiotic structures to the agents' crafting or shaping of meaning. This has brought back to the limelight an interest in the theory of praxis, the roots of which lie in Pierre Bourdieu's qualitative sociology and Harold Garfinkel's ethno-methodology, further developed by anthropology and sociology and especially by Andreas Reckwitz<sup>59</sup>. We owe to Reckwitz the trend whereby historians are putting agents centre-stage: agents, their interaction and their interpretation of culture (including politics) not as a sealed-off unit, but as the fruit of a daily struggle by agents to allocate meaning<sup>60</sup>. This perspective seems of great interest for political analysis, and may provide a meeting point for historians of different backgrounds.

For its part, history may be of help to the social sciences not just as an informed excavator of the archives<sup>61</sup>, but for its critical-historical analysis of concepts and theories. One example here is the debate over the concept of «political culture», coined by the political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in the 1950s, which has spread outside its original discipline and been heavily employed by historians, especially in North America following the cultural turn<sup>62</sup>. It has taken on a number of meanings, polarizing into two quite different usages: a) as a set of practices and values defining a political system, or b) as values, behaviours and signifiers associated with a political family or party<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4. «During the 1980s and much of the 1990s, many historians, in turn, among them a considerable number of social historians, had forsaken sociology in favor of seemingly more fashionable partners: discourse analysis and literary criticism. This contributed to increased methodological consciousness but privileged language and semantics to a degree where the grip on the social threatened to get lost. The questions of generalization and synthesis were pushed into the background without resolve». Th. Welskopp, *Irritating Flirtations. Reflections on the Relationship Between History and Sociology Since the 1970s*, in «InterDisciplines», 1 (2010), p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> G.M. Spiegel, *Introduction*, in G. M. Spiegel, *Practising History. New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> A. Reckwitz, *Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing*, in «European Journal of Social Theory», 5 (2002), pp. 243-263.

<sup>60</sup> S. Reichardt, *Zeithistorisches zur praxeologischen Geschichtswissenschaft*, in A. Brendecke (ed.), *Praktiken der Frühen Neuzeit. Akteure – Handlungen – Artefakte*, Wien-Köln-Weimar, Böhlau, 2015, p. 52.

<sup>61</sup> I. McLean, *Political Science and History*, cit., p. 362.

<sup>62</sup> R.P. Formisano, *The Concept of Political Culture*, in «Journal of Interdisciplinary History», 31 (2001), pp. 393-426.

<sup>63</sup> For this second use, see *Ibidem*, p. 416.

In migrating into other areas of history-writing, the concept has encountered criticism from those who regard it as too normative to convey a «cultural history of the political»<sup>64</sup>. Whatever its merits may be – on which we should remember that «political culture» has not always been used necessarily as normative in history and social science – the debate over the concept of «political culture» is instructive, above all because it once more stresses the need for historical analysis of concepts, which is a potential meeting point for historians and social scientists. Concepts have their historical collocation which requires to be analysed<sup>65</sup>. Even those who practise historical sociology with a sociological emphasis will agree about this<sup>66</sup>.

To stay with our example, then, I would prefer to take «political culture» in its second and more anthropological meaning, describing a set of meanings, values and practices connected with political formations during the age of organized twentieth-century parties. This would circumscribe use of the term in time and form, as advocated by the kind of cultural analysis of politics practised by Mergel, and avoiding the risk of any normative use of concepts. In general, however, to historians concepts, categories and generalizations cannot possess any intrinsic universality<sup>67</sup>. They may be applied to a range of situations after due assessment of compatibility and applicatory specificity, though without assuming they may be arbitrarily extended to other countries or epochs. If this is the basic requirement for political historians using concepts and theories devised by social sciences, then the critical analysis of concepts does seem to make a useful contribution to those disciplines too.

### 3. Conclusions

Dialogue between historiography and social science has not been, is not and probably will not be an easy business. The point of greatest difficulty lies in the fact that for there to be any dialogue, one must start from the awareness that the historical dimension is fundamental to the understanding of politics. Social and political issues have a historical dimension which needs to be reckoned with if we would grasp their social dynamics. Not that we should forget the different methodological bases dividing the different disciplines, but they are different ways of analysing the same object: politics or the political. Collaboration presupposes recognising our respective scientific premises, and not falling into methodological monism. The point of this paper is not to rake up a long-standing methodological dispute, but to reflect on the utility of social science for political history – which has inevitably led me to stray onto history in general. Historians use concepts and generalizations differently from (most) social scientists since application of such conceptual constructs always refers to a specific context. To quote Gaddis once more: they are «particular generalisations» with no claim to universality. From this standpoint the relation-

<sup>64</sup> Th. Mergel, *Kulturgeschichte der Politik*, Version: 2.0, in *Docupedia- Zeitgeschichte*, 22. 10.2012, URL: <http://docupedia.de/zg/>; Id., *Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik*, in «Geschichte und Gesellschaft», 28 (2002), pp. 574-606.

<sup>65</sup> Th. Welskopp, *Irritating Flirtations*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> M.R. Somers, *What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation*, in «Sociological Theory», 13 (1995), pp. 114-115.

<sup>67</sup> J.L. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, cit., p. 63.

ship with social science is useful to historians in general and political historians specifically when it comes to taking on board and/or refining concepts and theories for application to historical analysis – always provided that this is never simple application, but re-elaboration. Likewise, the historians' critique of concepts holds practical value for social scientists. The underlying point here is to recognise that the concepts and methods of social science have an intrinsic historical dimension which demands that we analyse how they have evolved. It follows that time – the distinguishing feature of history – becomes a possible meeting point with the social sciences<sup>68</sup>. But for any fruitful interdisciplinary comparison the starting assumption must be mutual recognition that the questions asked of the objects studied by these different disciplines are different yet equally legitimate; those questions correspond to different ways of analysing the same system of human relations. Only in that way will the brothers lay aside their suspicions.

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<sup>68</sup> Th. Welskopp, *Irritating Flirtations*, cit., p. 22 ff.

