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Good Neighbors

The Centrality of Social Science to the Revival of Political History

In het onderstaande artikel onderzoekt professor Julian Zelizer, aan de hand van het voorbeeld van de politieke geschiedenis in de Verenigde Staten, de mogelijkheden voor historici om gebruik te maken van andere disciplines.

Since the founding of the profession, historians have debated how much their discipline can benefit from exchanging ideas with the social sciences. The placement of historians within the university structure has always been a source of contention: should the discipline stand alongside the departments that constitute the social sciences or with the humanities? Proudly considering themselves to be part of the humanities, many members of the profession have consciously refrained from undertaking any interdisciplinary interaction with social scientists as they consider themselves to be part of a truly unique field, one that can gain little from looking toward economics, political science, anthropology, and sociology. In 1954, the intellectual historian John Higham captured this sentiment when he argued that his specialty required a humanistic approach. He contrasted what historians such as himself did to the quantitative and model-based analyses of social scientists who 'objectify ideas and values into form of behavior (...) Respect for the molding force of social controls replaces the humanistic emphasis on creative thinkers (...) Their stress on quantity, objectivity, and behavior will lead to external analysis.' Higham said the two methods were not compatible and that 'at some point' each scholar 'must choose.'[1]

Higham's concerns were not unique, and they have remained common throughout the historical profession. Many historians feel that social scientists produce ahistorical models that distort the past and limit themselves to a narrow set of data on the grounds - which historians dismiss as incorrect - that they can be interpreted objectively. Indeed, since the 1980s, when many historians were inspired by the 'linguistic turn' in the humanities and lost faith in the possibility of objective analysis, the intellectual antipathy

1 Peter Novick, *That noble dream: The 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (New York 1988) 382.

toward the 'hard' social sciences has greatly intensified.

The recent revival of American political history - one of the most exciting intellectual developments in the academy - demonstrates that fruitful collaborations can result when historians engage colleagues in neighboring departments. As a result of these interactions, political historians have moved from a position where they stood as marginal and isolated figures in the discipline of history to finding themselves at the cutting edge. Since the late-1990s, political history has regained tremendous professional respect and witnessed a surge of innovative research.[2]

Between the 1970s and 1990s, American political history had suffered through an extremely difficult period. The historians who came of age in the 1960s had been deeply influenced by the arguments and aspirations of the New Left. As graduate students, they decided to abandon the study of government leaders and public policy. The New Left criticized political historians from the 1950s and 1960s for writing about an ideological consensus in America while ignoring the long-standing conflicts over race, class, gender, and ethnicity since the Revolution. New Left historians also dismissed the 'presidential synthesis.' They argued that conventional historical narratives which revolved around the inhabitants of the White House did not adequately capture the experience of a majority of Americans.[3]

Determined to write history from the 'bottom up' and to capture how average Americans struggled for personal power, historians concluded that traditional political history was both elitist and irrelevant. The style of writing that had been popularized by several generations of historians, starting with George Bancroft in the nineteenth century and ending with Richard Hofstadter, John Blum, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the 1950s and 1960s, became the very thing which younger historians hoped to avoid. After the 1970s, mainstream historians concentrated on topics such as class conflict in the factory and in the community, the development and influence of popular culture, the ongoing struggle over gender roles, and the way in which personal relationships shaped power. In terms of publishing and hiring, devoting a career to political history became difficult (if not professionally suicidal).[4]

2 Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer, 'The democratic experiment: New directions in American political history,' in: *The democratic experiment: new directions in American political history,* Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer ed. (Princeton 2003) 1-19.

3 Julian E. Zelizer, 'Beyond the presidential synthesis: Reordering political time,' *A companion to post-1945 America* (Oxford 2002) 345-370.

4 Mark H. Leff, 'Revisioning U.S. political history,' *American Historical Review* 100

According to the historian Hugh Davis Graham, 'the ranks of traditional political history are depleted, their assumptions and methods discredited along with the Great White Men whose careers they chronicled.'[5]

In this environment, historians who sought to reverse this trend turned toward the social sciences for support and inspiration. This should not have been surprising. After all, the use of social science in political history has a long tradition. During the formative years of the research university, which took place at the turn of the twentieth century, disciplines such as Political Science and History shared common founding fathers. The American Political Science Association came into being as a result of a break away faction of the American Historical Association.[6] While some historians responded by distancing themselves from the newly formed social science disciplines, others urged their colleagues to act in a more positive fashion. George Burton Adams wrote in 1909 that historians could not afford to ignore the social scientific movement:

> 'The new interpretation of history brings us too much that is convincing, despite all the mere speculation that goes with it; its contribution to a better understanding of our problems is already too valuable; we are ourselves too clearly conscious in these later days of the tangled network of influences we are striving to unravel.'[7]

The progressive historians were devoted to these efforts. Upon joining the editorial board of the *American Historical Review* in 1910, Frederick Jackson Turner had argued that 'we should enter into overlapping fields more - the borderland between history in its older conception, and economics, sociology, psychology, geography, et cetera.'[8] Charles Beard - whose work influenced multiple disciplines - expressed a similar desire to craft a form of scientific history that could overcome the skepticism that existed among

(1995) 829-53, Steven M. Gillon, 'The future of political history,' *The Journal of Policy History* 9 (1997) 240-255, Joel H. Silbey, 'The state of American political history at the millennium: The nineteenth century as a test case,' *Journal of Policy History* 11 (1999) 1-30, William E. Leuchtenburg, 'The pertinence of political history: Reflections on the significance of the state in America,' *Journal of American History* 73 (1986) 585-600.

5 Hugh Davis Graham, 'The stunted career of policy history: A critique and agenda,' *The Public Historian* 15 (1993) 31.

6 Julian E. Zelizer, 'History and political science: together again?' *The Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004) 126.

7 Dorothy Ross, *The origins of American social science* (New York 1991) 299-300.

8 Novick, *That noble dream*, 90.

social scientists about the historian's ability to craft general arguments. 'Like the changing Chinese,' commented one social scientist in 1912, historians were finally moving in the right direction albeit slowly.[9] After becoming elected as the president of the American Historical Association in 1933, Beard promoted these ideals through the annual conference. Attendees were encouraged to grapple with work from other disciplines. 'Not only the past but the historians themselves sometimes struggled for a place in the proceedings,' one skeptical historian half-heartedly joked.[10] In the 1950s, the historian Richard Hofstadter applied arguments from sociology and psychology in his Pulitzer Prize winning book to understand how status anxiety caused upper class Americans to embrace reform in the progressive era.[11] Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Ellis Hawley wrote books that spoke to the concerns of social scientists like Robert Dahl, Louis Hartz, and David Truman.

When a small group of scholars in the 1970s attempted to renew interest in political history by studying the topic from the 'bottom up,' they looked toward the social sciences. Drawing on realignment theory in political science (which focused on how and why critical elections caused long-term shifts in partisan power) and behavioral approaches from sociology (which sought to explain recurring patterns of social behavior), the 'new political history' by scholars such as Samuel Hays, Paul Kleppner, Richard Formisano, and others attempted to employ quantitative techniques to explain which social and cultural factors caused nineteenth century voters to become loyal to one party over another.[12] A handful of social historians such as Michael Katz also turned to sociological research about class formation to write bottom-up histories of welfare and educational policy.[13]

But these efforts to revitalize political history in the 1970s achieved only limited results. Recreating American political history without returning to the presidential synthesis remained a difficult and elusive task for many scholars. While political history remained marginal in the discipline, some of the most appealing alternatives to describe America's political past ema-

9 Ross, *The origins of American social science*, 345-346.

10 John Higham, *History: Professional scholarship in America* (Baltimore 1989) 119.

11 Richard Hofstadter, *The age of reform* (New York 1955).

12 Paul Kleppner, *The cross of culture: A social analysis of Midwestern politics, 1850-1900* (New York 1970); Samuel P. Hays, *American political history as social analysis* (Knoxville 1980); Ronald P. Formisano, *The birth of mass political parties* (Princeton 1971).

13 Michael B. Katz, *The irony of early school reform: Educational innovation in mid-nineteenth century America* (Cambridge, MA 1968); Katz, *Class, bureaucracy, and schools: The illusion of educational change in America* (New York 1971).

nated directly from the social sciences. The scholarship that some social scientists produced provided an analytic foundation for the new generation of political historians in the 1990s who finally were able to bring the field back into the mainstream of their profession.

One of the most influential disciplines was Sociology. During the 1970s and 1980s, a group of talented political sociologists rejected the behavioral focus that had been adopted by their colleagues since the 1940s - one which had emphasized individual and organizational norms of political behavior. Rather than writing about values and social pressure, these sociologists claimed in their comparative studies of social revolutions that institutions, and their relationship to social groups, needed to be the subject of scholarly inquiry. Challenging traditional Marxist interpretations of class dynamics, sociologists such as Theda Skocpol argued that state actors and organizations operated independently and developed interests of their own.

> 'The class upheavals and socioeconomic transformations that have characterized social revolutions have been closely intertwined with the independently important collapse of the state organizations of the old regimes and the consolidation of the state organizations of the new regimes,' Skocpol wrote,' the state properly conceived is no mere arena in which socioeconomic transformations are fought out. It is, rather, a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, and more or less coordinated by, an executive authority.'[14]

Skocpol and her cohort mentored younger sociologists such as Ann Shola Orloff, Edwin Amenta, Jeff Goodwin, and Elisabeth Clemens who developed this tradition.[15] The American Sociological Association's Comparative and Historical Sociology section has helped to nurture this important network. Revealing how porous the disciplinary lines were that separated those who were defining this approach to studying politics, Skocpol later joined the Department of Government at Harvard University and went on to become the president of the American Political Science Association.

14 Theda Skocpol, 'State and revolution: Old regimes and revolutionary crisis in France, Russia, and China,' *Theory and Society* 7 (1979) 12.

15 Ann Shola Orloff, *The politics of pensions: A comparative analysis of Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1880-1940* (Madison 1993); Jeff Goodwin, *No other way out: States and revolutionary movements, 1945-1991* (New York 2001); Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The people's lobby: Organizational innovation and the rise of interest group politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago 1997); Edwin Amenta, *Bold relief* (Princeton 1998).

Drawing on comparative scholarship, these sociologists offered powerful arguments about how the state could act with an unexpected degree of independence. In contrast to traditional political history that tended to portray politicians as responding to social interests and political movements, this scholarship suggested that the structure and agenda of government institutions could profoundly influence the actions and decisions of societal actors.[16] Honing in on 'the state' as a broader institution and understanding how it related to other organizations and social groups provided younger historians with an exciting conceptual strategy for thinking about the federal government in America and moving research beyond the familiar parade of presidents that were found in classroom textbooks.

The second source of social science scholarship on political history in the 1980s and 1990s came from the field of Political Science. Closely associated with the investigation of state formation that produced by political sociologists, the subfield of American Political Development took shape in the 1980s. Political scientists were attacking the norms-based approach of 1960s behavioralism by moving toward rational-choice explanations of politics that centered on individual calculations. As mainstream political scientists decided to pursue narrower questions that could be answered through clearly defined data sets, the APD cohort moved in a different direction by seeking to tackle bigger questions about how government institutions evolved. The core concept for American Political Development was the long-term impact of critical moments (historical junctures, as political scientists would call them) and how the adoption of specific policies transformed subsequent politics. The types of policies adopted at one point in time, according to scholars such as Theodore Lowi, profoundly constrained the options for politicians in future eras (in making this argument about policy feedback, Lowi and others built on the work of the political scientist E.E. Schattschneider who had introduced this concept several decades earlier).[17]

Stephen Skowronek's *Building a New American State* (1982) was a landmark book in American Political Development. Skowronek focused on how political elites abandoned the state of 'courts and parties' that characterized nineteenth century governance for an executive-centered, administrative

16 The most powerful articulation of this argument can be found in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol ed., *Bringing the state back in* (New York 1982).

17 Theodore Lowi, 'Decision making versus policy making: toward an antidote for technocracy,' *Public Administration Review* 30 (1970) 314-325; Lowi, 'Four systems of policy, politics, and choice,' *Public Administration Review* 32 (1972) 298-310.

state in the twentieth century. Based on historical research, Skowronek found that institutional reforms in the progressive era were layered on top of reforms from the Gilded Age.[18] The result was a jerry-built state that continued to shape governance throughout the twentieth century. Institutions were central in Skowronek's analysis. He chose the progressive era because he believed it to be a time when historians had tended to focus primarily on ideas. Skowronek's book was one of the first of a vibrant, analytic literature about political history which centered on institutional change and autonomous government actors. In 1986, Skowronek and Karen Orren founded the journal *Studies in American Political Development*. After its formation in 1988, the History and Politics section of the American Political Science Association grew rapidly. Much of the scholarship focused on the comparative question of why the American welfare state was so meager and why it was so slow to develop in comparison to European systems. Their goal was not simply to produce narrative history or to use history to prove theories (which had been common practice among policy scholars in the 1960s), but rather to identify institutional structures that persisted over time and which continued to influence governance.[19]

The institutional arguments put forth by American Political Development scholars as well as political sociologists pushed younger political historians to think in new ways. The social sciences were forcing historians to consider political actors within broader institutional settings, to avoid interpretations that revolved around a single individual (including the president), and to understand the organizational infrastructure surrounding the creation of policy. Two of the more reflective practitioners of the historical institutionalism, Skocpol and Paul Pierson, recently explained that 'tackling big, real-world questions; tracing processes through time; and analyzing institutional configurations and contexts - these are the features that define historical institutionalism'.[20] As a result of this literature public policy became a focus of inquiry in itself, rather than just a way to under-

18 Stephen Skowronek, *Building a new American state. The expansion of national administrative capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge 1982). For a discussion of this book see the roundtable, which I edited, in *Social science history*, 27 (2003).

19 Paul Pierson, *Politics in time: history, institutions and social analysis* (Princeton 2004).

20 Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, 'historical institutionalism in contemporary political science,' in: , Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner eds., *Political science: state of the discipline* (New York 2002) 713.

stand presidents.[21] Policy historians discovered that political change often occurred in response to developments within the governmental realm rather than only stemming from society or the economy.

Finally there was Anthropology. For historians, one of the most influential voices in anthropology was Clifford Geertz. Although Geertz was not interested in political history, he offered a set of arguments about culture and ideology that proved enormously appealing to younger political historians. Geertz found that 'thick' and elaborate cultural frameworks shaped even the most minor societal acts. He concluded that ideology constituted a powerful force in determining social action. Culture often shaped and defined how individuals perceived everyday events rather than simply expressing reality.[22] Geertz's findings complemented arguments from the philosopher Thomas Kuhn, who had written about how paradigm shifts occurred in intellectual thought.[23] These types of arguments convinced historians to incorporate new factors into their analysis, such as symbols, ideology, and rhetoric. Culture offered a subject that could appeal to mainstream historians while organizing research in such a way that cut across state and society to avoid the separation between 'elite' and 'mass' experience.

These anthropological arguments about culture were adopted almost immediately by political historians such as Robert Kelley, Paula Baker, Jean Baker, and Daniel Walker Howe. They started to write about the history of political culture in America. According to Jo Freeman (a political scientist), the study of political culture involved 'the underlying assumptions and rules that government behavior in the political system (...) manifestation in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimensions of politics.'[24] This scholarship centered on the evolution of discourse, ideology, manners and customs, social interactions between members of political systems, and traditions of learning about the practice of politics.[25] In one classic book, for instance, the historian Jean Baker provided a fascinating account of how

21 Julian E. Zelizer, 'Clio's lost tribe. Public policy history since 1978,' *The Journal of Policy History* 12 (2000) 369-394.

22 Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures. Selected essays* (New York 1973).

23 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago 1962).

24 Jo Freeman, 'The political culture of the democratic and republican parties,' *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (1986) 327-238.

25 Robert Kelley, 'The interplay of American political culture and public policy. The Sacramento River as a case study,' *Journal of Policy History* 1 (1989). Daniel Walker Howe, *The political culture of American Whigs* (Chicago 1979). Jean Baker, *Affairs of party. The political culture of Northern Democrats in the mid-nineteenth century* (Ithaca 1983).

nineteenth century Americans learned about the political process in the classroom. Historians of gender and race, who had been trained under the social history revolution, found this approaching appealing and reentered discussions about politics. Moving beyond initial efforts to document women's exclusion from politics, gender historians began to trace how women were influential in all periods of American history. Paula Baker, for example, argued that there were two different political cultures in the United States before the 1920s, each of which revolved around distinct conceptions of gender. While women did not participate in male-centered party politics, Baker claimed that through voluntary associations, female reformers took the lead in social welfare activities and developed new forms of political participation that would later be absorbed by the modern state.[26] Linda Gordon, Eileen Boris, and Alice Kessler-Harris demonstrated how gendered ideas of work and citizenship shaped a wide-range of domestic policies.[27]

Today political history is in good shape. There are two varieties of political history that have flourished in recent years: institutional political history and socio-cultural political history.[28] Institutional historians have provided complex organizational and institutional histories of government and public policy while socio-cultural historians have explored social movements and political culture from both non-elite and elite levels. Some of the best work in recent years, including books by historians such as Tom Sugrue, Gareth Davies, William Novak, Michael Willrich, Jennifer Klein, Alice O'Connor, Richard John, Meg Jacobs, Paul Milazzo and others have been self-conscious efforts to nurture this interdisciplinary conversation.[29]

26 Paula Baker, 'The domestication of politics: women and American political society, 1780-1920,' *American Historical Review* 89 (1984) 620-647.

27 Linda Gordon, *Pitied but not entitled: single mothers and the history of social welfare* (New York 1994); Eileen Boris, *Home to work. Motherhood and the politics of industrial homework in the United States* (Cambridge 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In pursuit of equity. Women, men and the quest for economic citizenship in twentieth century America* (New York 2001).

28 These terms are defined and examined in Jacobs and Zelizer, 'The democratic experiment.'

29 Richard R. John, *Spreading the news. The American postal system from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge MA 1995), Tom Sugrue, *The origins of the urban crisis: race and equality in postwar Detroit* (Princeton 1996); William Novak, *The people's welfare. Law and regulation in nineteenth century America* (Chapel Hill 1996), Gareth Davies, *From opportunity to entitlement. The transformation and decline of great society liberalism* (Lawrence 1999); Alice O'Connor, *Poverty knowledge. Social science, so-*

Border-crossing among disciplines has thus remained integral to most in this generation. They have incorporated social scientific analytical insights without losing the historian's emphasis on contingency, human agency, narrative, and archival research. Writing about an anthology that showcased some of this recent scholarship in political history, Ira Katznelson - a political scientist and historian by training - commented: 'a new group of political historians has begun to produce problem-oriented, wide-scope studies (...) that often draw on social scientific questions, propositions, theories, and methods without any sacrifice of their grounding in the particularities of time and place.'[30]

Furthermore, the job market has shown signs of vitality with a number of new positions in political history opening at research institutions. The enrollment for courses in political history tends to be very high across the country. A number of series at prominent university presses specialize in political history, while trade houses continue their ongoing search for scholars to write about these topics. Panels on political history, broadly defined, can be found at the Organization of American Historians Convention and the American Historical Association Convention. *The Journal of Policy History*, itself a testament to the vitality of the field, holds a biannual conference that draws senior scholars from around the world.

This success would not have happened without the work of scholars in sociology, political science, and anthropology. Without question, these disciplines gave rise to the new field of American political history. They helped younger political historians to find new ways of conceptualizing political history and to avoid recreating the presidential synthesis. Indeed, political history offers one of the most striking examples of true inter-disciplinary collaboration. Scholars traverse disciplinary boundaries with an ease and comfort rarely found elsewhere. Equally important has been the fact that the scholarship itself is in constant conversation with research taking place in other disciplines. While disciplinary boundaries have their function and value, the experience of political history is a striking reminder of what can be gained by looking across old divisions.

cial policy and the poor in twentieth century U.S. history (Princeton 2001); Jennifer Klein, *For all these rights. Business, labor, and the shaping of America's public-private welfare state* (Princeton 2003); Michael Willrich, *City of courts. Socializing justice in progressive era Chicago* (New York 2003); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook politics. Economic citizenship in twentieth century America* (Princeton 2004); Paul Charles Milazzo, *Unlikely environmentalists. Congress and clean water, 1945-1972* (Lawrence 2006).

30 Ira Katznelson, 'The possibilities of analytic political history,' in: *The Democratic Experiment* 383.