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The social scientific turn in modern British history

Over the past two decades, scholars of modern British history have increasingly revisited the classic social science of the post-war period. On the one hand, the findings and raw survey data produced by social researchers from the 1940s to the 1980s have been mined as rich sources for understanding class, gender, political orientation, race, and everyday life in mid-twentieth century Britain. On the other hand, the published works of social scientists, many of which have had an outsized influence in shaping popular understandings of the post-war period, have been re-interrogated, historicised, and treated as historical texts themselves—and in some cases challenged for their methodological limitations, political and ideological biases, and for reinforcing dominant social norms rather than dispassionately documenting social reality.

In his intervention in this issue of *Twentieth Century British History* John Goldthorpe, the lead author of one of the most influential works of post-war social research, the 1962 *Affluent Worker* study of class attitudes of manufacturing workers in Luton, has thrown the ball back into the historians' court by challenging what he takes to be the disregard for research methodology by some scholars and historians who have drawn on the study and its survey material. Goldthorpe—who once influentially critiqued the use of history by sociologists by pointing out that while sociologists could generate their own evidence through carefully designed studies, historians were forced to rely on the study of available 'relics' to conduct their research—has thrown down a methodological gauntlet to historians now revisiting the sources produced by social scientists such as himself.[1] This short response takes Goldthorpe's critique as an opportunity to highlight the methodological diversity in what might be called the 'social scientific turn' amongst modern British historians. In distinguishing the ways that this 'social scientific turn' manifests along distinct and sometimes divergent methodological lines, we can gain a better understanding of both what it means to use the social sciences as historical material, and to historicize social science itself.

The field of modern British history is a closely networked community, and its practitioners work across neat methodological lines. But within the 'social scientific turn' in modern British history we can nonetheless discern two strands of work: the first by historians influenced by what might be loosely understood as intellectual history and political history methods, who seek to highlight the political and cultural influence of social science in British culture and government; and the second by historians who have engaged closely with the research materials of post-war social science as source bases for understanding the lived experience of the social and cultural shifts of the post-war period.

The history of the human sciences has long been central to the work of historians of psychology, medicine, and emotions. In more recent years, however, it has taken centre stage in cultural, social, political and intellectual histories of post-war Britain. In 2004 Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton called attention to the 'consequences for historians of the post-war rise of the social scientist' and the ways in which 'political science, economics, sociology and cultural studies have fashioned interpretations of the meanings of [the post-war] period'.[2] In the nearly two decades since, scholars have heeded this call from different directions. Some have emphasised both the influence and limits of the social sciences to systems of technocratic governance in Britain and in the Empire.[3] Others have has emphasised the role of social

[1] John H. Goldthorpe, 'The uses of history in sociology: Reflections on some recent tendencies', *British Journal of Sociology*, 42, no. 2 (1991), 211-230.
[2] Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, 'Introduction—The uses (and abuses) of affluence', in Black and Pemberton, eds, *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War 'Golden Age' Revisited* (Aldershot, 2004), 5.
[3] Erik Linstrum, *Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Freddy Foks, 'Bronislaw Malinowski, "indirect rule", and the colonial politics of functionalist anthropology, ca. 1925-1940', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60, no. 1 (2018), 35-57; Helen Tilley and Robert Gordon, eds, *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester, 2007).

scientific ideas in shaping popular attitudes, subjectivity, and culture, with influential work examining, for example, the ways in which psychology framed the subjectivity and self-understanding of twentieth-century Britons; the ways in which post-war sociologists of women reframed women's work in terms of their 'material aspirations and social and psychic needs' rather than in terms of older concerns about poverty or marital neglect; and the role of social scientific expertise in mediating encounters between the state, Commonwealth migrants, and Britons abroad during decolonization in the 1950s and 60s.[4] Political and intellectual historians (including myself) have emphasised the interpenetration of the social sciences and the problems of the post-war left, including the electoral frustrations of the Labour Party in the 1950s. This work has highlighted the ways in which sociology, psychology and anthropology provided a conceptual arsenal for left intellectuals to understand changes to capitalism, embrace 'everyday life', and articulate a politics of community and family in reaction to the dominant 'Labourist' ethic of the Attlee government and trade union movement.[5] Together, these historians have positioned the social sciences and social scientists not only as interpreters of the social changes of mid-twentieth century and post-war Britain, but as agents which have significantly shaped modern British politics and culture.

A closely related but differently oriented body of work, meanwhile, has sought to revisit the original materials and fieldnotes from post-war community studies and studies of class to explore the gulf between how sociologists and researchers talked about people, and how they understood *themselves*. Selina Todd's work has reinvestigated the lived experience of the post-war working class, 'to challenge the prevailing emphasis on affluence in histories of post-war Britain' and to reframe class as 'a dynamic social relationship within which [respondents] operated a degree of agency'.[6] While Todd's work does seek to revisit and highlight the limitations of the categories of analysis deployed by social researchers, including Goldthorpe and his collaborators, her focus is on re-centring and recovering lived experience.[7] A frequent touchstone for historians is Mike Savage's 2010 book *Identities and Social Change: The Politics of Method*, which chronicles 'the creeping rise of the social science apparatus' in establishing the categories by which English society has been understood, describes the movement of sociology from a moralised field of social research undertaken by 'gentlemanly amateurs' to a professional discipline, and issues a call, which many historians have heeded, to subject the research materials of post-war social researchers to qualitative re-analysis.[8] This latter appeal has been met by a number of historians: Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's work on class identities from 1968 to 2000 looks beyond the findings and categories of social researchers to 'use people's own words to examine what they thought and felt about class, society, and themselves'.[9] And Jon Lawrence's work has turned the spotlight on to social researchers to reveal their ideological priors, class position and political and social attitudes; stressed the gulf between official and vernacular understandings of class and community; and recovered 'how ordinary men and women from a broad range of social

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[4] Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth- Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006); see also Thomson, *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy, and Social Policy in Britain c.1870–1959* (Oxford, 1988); Helen McCarthy, 'Social science and married women's employment in post-war Britain', *Past and Present*, no. 233 (November 2016), 269–305; Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, 2012).

[5] Freddy Foks, 'The sociological imagination of the British New Left: "Culture" and the "managerial society" c. 1956-1962', *Modern Intellectual History*, 15, no. 3 (2018), 801-820; Alexandre Campsie, 'Mass Observation, left intellectuals and the politics of everyday life', *English Historical Review*, 131, no. 548 (2016), 92–121; Lise Butler, 'Michael Young, the Institute of Community Studies, and the politics of kinship', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26, no. 2 (2015), 203–24; Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science, and the British Left, 1945-70* (Oxford, 2020).

[6] Selina Todd, 'Affluence, class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the post-war working class', *Contemporary British History*, 22, no. 4 (2008), 501–18.

[7] Selina Todd, 'Class, experience, and Britain's twentieth century' *Social History*, 39, no. 4 (2014), 489–508.

[8] Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010).

[9] Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968–2000* (Oxford, 2018), 12.

backgrounds and geographical locations made sense of social change in their own words'.[10] These approaches have all relied on close engagement with the original survey material behind published works of social science, as well as the correspondence, marginalia and other unpublished sources which reveal the textured and uncertain context in which social scientists derived their findings.

It is this latter strand of the social scientific turn in modern British history that Goldthorpe's critique targets most directly. In the preface and acknowledgements to *Identities and Social Change* Savage thanks a number of social scientists, including Goldthorpe, for sharing their reflections on the original studies which he revisited in his book: 'I hope', he writes, 'they will put up with my no doubt idiosyncratic reading of their role and significance'.[11] It seems that for Goldthorpe, at least, such tolerance has a limit. He suggests that in revisiting the *Affluent Worker* study Savage, Lawrence, Todd and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have paid insufficient attention to the methodology of the original studies. A central plank of Goldthorpe's critique is historians' imputation of researcher motivation on the basis of 'back page notes' written by researchers on survey material: these notes, Goldthorpe insists, were encouraged by him and Lockwood 'so that we could get some idea of whether any were encountering difficulties in their work or whether problems were arising with particular questions' and 'served as a kind of 'release' after perhaps a hard and trying day'. But they should not, Goldthorpe insists, be interpreted as part of the research data of the studies.[12]

Goldthorpe offers a useful reminder to historians to avoid using snatches of archival material to generalise about the attitudes of a social group, for example in his specific critique of Todd's use of the Luton studies to suggest that 'the car workers of Luton saw Britain as a two class society.'[13] He warns that if historians do not adopt clear principles for selecting material from survey notes '[t]here is little to prevent—unconscious if not conscious—selection of material in order to sustain a favoured line of argument.'[14] But it is difficult to square Goldthorpe's claim, levelled against Lawrence's argument that the class attitudes of *Affluent Worker* study researchers shaped their interaction with their subjects, that 'seeking to draw *any* general conclusions from the back-page notes of the *Affluent Worker* interviews is misguided', with his own basic methodological precepts, developed as an undergraduate at UCL, on the importance of subjecting historical documents to rigorous contextualization by asking: 'What were the circumstances—often meaning the socio-political context—that led to this document being produced?'[15] While historians should, of course, be cautious not to conflate the findings of researchers with their personal feelings and reflections on their research process, and must be cautious about the inferences they draw from individual reflections, drawing insights from research notes and other forms of paratext is well-established historical practice, and central to both intellectual and cultural history methods. There is a certain irony that, if anything, Goldthorpe's critique of historians' research methods reinforces his influential caution to sociologists against relying too heavily on the research of historians, whose methods are, by necessity and disciplinary norm, more subjective and less systematic. While sociologists are wise to heed Goldthorpe's influential arguments against the incautious use of history to support theories of social deviance, kinship, or other social processes, historians of social science are under no obligation to constrain their use of informal aspects of the research processes of the

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[10] Jon Lawrence, 'Inventing the "traditional working class": A re-analysis of interviews from Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London*', *Historical Journal*, 59, no. 2 (2016), 567–93; Lawrence, 'Social science encounters and the negotiation of difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 77 (spring 2014), 215–39; Lawrence, 'Class, "affluence" and the study of everyday life in Britain, c.1930–64', *Cultural and Social History* 10:2 (2013), 273-299; *Me, Me, Me?: The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.
[11] Savage, *Identities and Social Change*, ix.
[12] Goldthorpe, this issue [23-4]
[13] Goldthorpe, [20], citing Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2015), 20.
[14] Goldthorpe, [20].
[15] Goldthorpe, [3, 25-27].

social researchers they study to shed light on the conditions under which their findings were produced.

While Goldthorpe's challenge to the historians who have made use of the *Affluent Worker* study does offer correctives to some specific conclusions drawn on the basis of this work, his intervention arguably reinforces the value of many of the contextualist reinterpretations of post-war social science discussed above. His revelation, for example, that the emphasis on critical case design and strong quantitative focus which he and David Lockwood took to the *Affluent Worker* study was part of an effort to buttress the research from critique by Edward Shils, then working to advance the CIA's Non-Communist Left strategy via the journal *Encounter*, offers a fascinating insight into the very real politics of method.[16] Historians (and in Savage's case, a historically minded sociologist) have drawn on the *Affluent Worker* study to different ends: some have used the original survey material as a source of insight into the changing attitudes and experience of the working class themselves, some have drawn on the study as a key episode in a broader story of how sociology and other social sciences contributed to reframing academic and popular understanding of class in post-war Britain, and others have examined the gulf between, in Lawrence's frame, 'official' and 'vernacular' understandings of class and social change. The different aims with which historians, influenced by different methodologies and with different objects of inquiry, revisit this and many other examples of post-war social research need to be foregrounded in both assessing Goldthorpe's critique, and the methodology and value of the 'social scientific turn' in modern British history today.

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[16] Goldthorpe, [10].