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# Introduction. Between Society and University: Humanities and Social Sciences in Canada

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# **Introduction**

## **Between Society and University: Humanities and Social Sciences in Canada**

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With the development of the tertiary sector, the welfare state and now the so-called “knowledge society” and “knowledge economy,” societies around the world have solicited inputs from the social sciences more than ever before.

Evidently, these changes have affected universities. Social science faculties have consequently acquired a privileged location within institutions of higher learning as a result of the functions that they fulfil as well as the sheer quantity of students that enrol in them. While professors in Canadian social science departments composed an insignificant minority at the end of the nineteenth century, their proportion has skyrocketed in the last half-century.

Yet, the transformations which social scientific teaching and research have undergone have not really been studied in an interdisciplinary manner. Frederick Gareau’s recommendations of a systematic historical analysis of the social sciences that would itself employ social scientific techniques<sup>1</sup> have largely fallen upon deaf ears. Recently published essays have proclaimed either the newly forged domination of the social sciences or their demise.<sup>2</sup> While we admit to having taken pleasure from reading

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1. Frederick H. Gareau, “The Multinational Version of Social Science with Emphasis upon the Discipline of Sociology,” *Current Sociology* 33, 3 (1985): 1-169.

2. The debate in 2004 around the transformation of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (“Transformation from a Granting Council to a Knowledge Council”) exemplifies this polarization. See *The Summary Report of Consultations held at Concordia University*, [http://oor.concordia.ca/DOWNLOAD/Concordia\\_Report\\_to\\_SSHRC.pdf](http://oor.concordia.ca/DOWNLOAD/Concordia_Report_to_SSHRC.pdf) (accessed August 7, 2007).

some of these essays, we were nonetheless struck by the absence of concrete historical analysis capable of corroborating their analysis. In order to contribute to a research program devoted to understanding the development of social sciences in Canada, instead of simply complaining about their demise or their marginalization compared to the natural sciences, we present here a series of empirical analyses of the formation and transformation of the Canadian social sciences since the 1900s.

A great many books and articles have been published on the history of different social science disciplines. We are well aware that a vast bibliography already exists on the history of anthropology, economy, psychology and political science, to name only a few, and many of these studies are cited in the papers comprising this issue. Yet these researches have been mostly done by insiders to those disciplines and thus in isolation from each other. This special issue of *Scientia Canadensis* try to promote a more collective dialogue by looking at the historical evolution of many disciplines: anthropology, economy, psychology, and statistics. Of course more examples could have been included but these examples can serve as a good starting point. While each paper is interesting in itself, we think they all acquire more meaning and relevance when put in perspective with each other.

Generally speaking, all social sciences academic disciplines have experienced the same cycle of growth. They all used the rise of the university population in the aftermath of the Second World War to promote the institutionalization and reproduction of their specific discipline and associated knowledge. Departments were created and gained autonomy, sometimes only to be later subdivided again. Their various branches became as many fields of expertise. Such a general trend cannot be denied but it leaves in the dark the many battles through which this process took place (and indeed continues to take place). How was autonomy obtained for specific disciplines? For example, at some universities, sociology was closer to law, and at other to philosophy or to political economy. Such local relationships left their marks on the development of that discipline. Although it was similarly institutionalized at McGill, UQAM and Toronto, to speak only of these three institutions, no one familiar with Canadian sociology could mistake one department for the other. Therefore, it is crucial to grasp in an empirical manner the capacity that a given discipline has to impose its own criteria and norms to the organizations, institutions and systems towards which it has gravitated.

Jean-Philippe Warren and Yves Gingras open this special issue by providing a global portrait of the quantitative evolution of social sciences in the last century. As everyone could have guessed, social science students and faculty have increased enormously in absolute number as well as in proportion of the total university population in the last one

hundred years. Two important factors of this growth are underlined: the democratization of institutions of higher learning and the job market boom in areas connected to social sciences.

The following articles explore the multifaceted question of autonomy. Jonathan Fournier discusses the fight for legitimacy which triggered many conflicts between different departments of economy in Quebec francophone universities. He stresses the attempt by economists to situate themselves advantageously in a rapidly evolving disciplinary environment. Analyzing the connections between academic anthropology and external forces (museums, civil service, international support), Andrew Nurse reveals how the ideal of autonomy is set within a specific historical context, where the State played a crucial role. Such a conclusion is confirmed by Jean-Pierre Beaud and Jean-Guy Prévost's analysis of the dialectics of the general and the particular in the recent and past history of Canadian statistics. The level of statistical inquiries is dependent on changing political and economic realities. Likewise, Nicolas Marchand reveals the weight of external demands on the development of Canadian psychology. Pressures coming from the state and from corporations helped move the discipline in a direction far removed from its humanistic origins. Finally, Mike Almeida explores the important but neglected question of the growth of social sciences research centres in Canadian universities. He underlines external and internal factors in the development of these groups and teams, and acknowledges pressures coming from granting institutions and academic administrations as much as from faculty. The intertwining of a vast array of objectives contributed to creating the space now occupied by Research centres alongside the traditional departments in the economy of academic organisations which produce knowledge.

The general conclusion one can take out of these articles is important: it does not suffice to confirm the global and quasi universal 'progress' of social sciences from generalist and loose disciplines to highly specialized and well institutionalized departments. As a second step, historians have to take seriously the task of revealing the specific struggles through which this transformation took place, and the different strategies which were employed to enhance each discipline's visibility, prestige, and funding. For examples, the routes which economy and anthropology followed to create symbolic and institutional boundaries are quite different, and sometimes clearly divergent. It is not necessarily scientificity which is here at stake (anthropology is no less a science than economy although it stresses qualitative methods and critical theories, and has avoided the kind of reductionism which has supposedly brought economy closer to the model of natural sciences), but the form of science, and the interests it serves. Such questions cannot be overlooked.

We hope that the variety of disciplines, the periods analysed, the perspective adopted and the conclusions drawn all contribute to make this special issue of *Scientia Canadensis* a stimulating endeavour at interdisciplinarity that should be pursued further in the years to come. As a final remark, we wish to warmly thank Stéphane Castonguay for his generous and excellent editorial work.