

Social history—historical sociology

On interdisciplinary research

Ursula Mense-Petermann, Sebastian Matthias Schlerka, Thomas Welskopp

Q: »Always makes me feel a little melancholy. Grand old war ships, being ignominiously hauled away for scrap ... The inevitability of time, don't you think? What do you see?«

James Bond: »A bloody big ship.«¹

The *Fighting Temeraire Tugged to Her Last Berth to Be Broken Up, 1838*, is an 1839 painting by the English master artist Joseph Mallord William Turner. Located in the National Gallery in London, it was again voted the most popular work of art in the United Kingdom in 2005. It is an extraordinary piece of symbolism. Turner tells his story not just as a sentimental journey—he had not witnessed this last voyage in person, but took considerable license in arranging the scene. Nevertheless, his message is becoming ever more clear: modernity is in the process of scrapping premodern times in the very same overwhelming sense that Karl Marx and Frederick Engels dramatized in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Active in the Napoleonic Wars, the armed vessel earned her fame especially due to her performance at Trafalgar. She appears battle-ridden and battle-hardened, but is now portrayed as being unceremoniously tugged away to be cut up and scrapped. The painting thus symbolizes the historical demise of marine warfare artfully conducted by fleets of wooden sailing ships. The future was to be battleships made of steel and powered by steam. The overpowering might of modern times is exemplified by the soot-caked, squat, paddle-wheel steam tugboat with its tall smokestack,

1 *Skyfall*, directed by Sam Mendes (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2012).

its ugliness contrasting the shining beauty of the old three-masted sailing ship, highlighted by Turner's illumination in grim contrast to a dubious sunset, tugging the proud line-of-battle ship into a dark future which holds nothing for her but utter destruction.

One could interpret the painting as an allegory of the ascent of the coal- and steam-powered modern capitalist society with the shining past in helpless tow. The future lies in the gloomy sunset and not in the innocently shimmering past. The aesthetic contrast between the proud and beautiful, but shagged out and unrigged hull of the *Fighting Temeraire* and the stocky, smoke-belching tugboat bringing its machine-powered muscle to bear, is stark, leaving the impression that the future at this time would not necessarily lead toward a glorious dreamworld, but to a sweaty, sooty modernity fueled by the exploitation of mankind and the environment alike.

That remains, of course, our interpretation, and in this respect lies in the eye of the beholder, but we think that the painting represents the relationship between history and sociology that has developed over the past ten years at the BGHS in an almost ideal way. This does not mean that the *Temeraire* simply stands for history and the tugboat is a metaphor for sociology only. Nor should it convey the message that, because this is its final issue, *InterDisciplines* is bound for doom.

To the contrary: *InterDisciplines* can look back on a successful history of bringing the two disciplines into a productive communicative relationship again, as is exemplified by the interdisciplinary projects presented in the articles in this issue. The decisive aspects are connecting the past and the present, reaching an understanding that both disciplines have chosen society as their shared object of research, and the fact that modernity is loosely the main common focus—whereby the research questions diverge across a broad spectrum ranging from diagnosing current affairs and the complicated problems of determining the contrasts between premodern and modern times to disentangle the forces and processes of transformation. This final issue of *InterDisciplines* demonstrates that this new level of cooperation has been reached both by making history more sensitive to questions of systematization and theoretical reflection and by infusing sociology with a sense of historicity.

During its eight years of existence as an online (and selectively printed) interdisciplinary journal, *InterDisciplines* has come full circle. In its initial issue, the diagnosis of the relationship between history and sociology had been mixed to skeptical. Vol. 1, no. 1 (2010) was entitled »End of Messages? The State of Dialogue between History and Sociology,« and the question mark loomed large. The current issue »Social History—Historical Sociology: On Interdisciplinary Research,« in contrast, is a definite positive statement. Thus we venture to document that much has happened between 2010 and 2018, and that a productive and creative development has unfolded since this point of departure. There are now, after all, currents of messages flowing back and forth between the disciplines.

In consequence, we have decided to dedicate the last issue of *InterDisciplines* to the progress of the renewed cooperation between history and sociology and to take the opportunity to bring the journal's life cycle to its conclusion not with a melancholy whimper but with a bold statement of achievement. It is by no means thematic exhaustion or a lack of public attention that stop our journal's further development. The German federal government's excellence funding has been terminated for graduate schools in general as of October 2019. The fact alone that funding for 2019 has been cut to 30 percent of its previous level does not allow us to continue the journal. This means that the editorial office of *InterDisciplines*, which has its place at the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS), has to close down at the end of 2018. Confronted with this constellation, we will not be able to publish further issues of *InterDisciplines*. We can only hope that it will be possible to identify alternative options and sources of money in order to revive this journal in the not-too-distant future. The title of this (for now) final issue illustrates the self-understanding of interdisciplinary cooperation between history and sociology which has flourished in the lively discussions in *InterDisciplines* over the past eight years.

InterDisciplines has been published twice a year. This explains that a total of 18 issues have been published so far, including the current one. The journal's target group has been doctoral candidates, postdocs and professors—both as readers and as contributors. Thus we have been able to recruit a wide range of authors. This final issue is unique inasmuch as

it combines contributions by students, doctoral researchers, and professors. Our double-blind peer review process has always relied on international reviewers who have at least completed their doctorates.

The history of *InterDisciplines*—reflecting a revitalized dialogue between history and sociology—has been closely linked to the history of the BGHS. In recent years in particular, the BGHS itself has become more and more visible in the pages of *InterDisciplines*. One important reason for this is that the Annual Seminar of the BGHS, which has always been dedicated precisely to this dialogue, has used *InterDisciplines* as its main forum for publishing its discussions and findings. Two issues were direct follow-ups of Annual Seminars: »Done with Eurocentrism? Directions, diversions, and debates in history and sociology« (vol. 8, no. 2, 2017) and »Structures and Events—A Dialogue between History and Sociology« (vol. 7, no. 2, 2016). Notwithstanding the fact that conflicting perspectives on the dialogue between history and sociology will persist, it can be stated that our journal has decisively contributed to this dialogue no longer being questioned in principle.

Agnes Piekacz's article provides an inspiring example of what the merging of sociological and historical perspectives may look like in the future—not necessarily charting out a new and separate field of historical sociology, but making claims to clusters of projects that combine theoretical and methodological insights from more than one discipline. Her paper brings together not only history and sociology in general, but a broad spectrum of sub-disciplines, such as economic history, colonial history, imperial history, cultural history, and market sociology. It discusses concepts of »imagining markets« using a well-constructed case study of the sale of used clothes, especially of army and naval provenance, in Natal, a South African British colony, as the field of empirical description. It becomes clear how complex colonial economies were and how much they were fueled by emigration propaganda and expectations of an »imagined future.«

Chris Thornhill suggests using a historical-sociological approach to address the problem of the precarious foundations of constitutional law and, consequently, of the societal reserves of legitimacy. In his article »Historical Sociology and the Antinomies of Constitutional Democracy: Notes on a

Revised Approach,« he criticizes existing sociological accounts of the constitution for having simplified the legitimational functions of constitutions and shows that the most important shortcoming of such analyses is that they do not account for the inherent antinomies in constitutionalism. A discussion of six fundamental antinomies leads him to a more nuanced understanding of the constitution. Thornhill then traces the social origins of the norms incorporated in constitutional law and develops a model of modern constitutionalism grounded in a »modified systems-theoretical pattern of historical sociology.« Such a historical-sociological approach, the author argues, allows scholars to reveal and explain the precarious foundations of constitutional law.

Felix Bathon's article »Holding Doors for Others—A History of the Emergence of a Polite Behavior« examines this practice from the perspective of historical sociology. Asking *why* holding doors for others is considered polite and how, he poses the hypothesis that the increasing size of hoop skirts created a functional need for holding doors. In order to test this hypothesis, he reconstructs two historical sequences—a fashion sequence of the development of hoop skirts and a politeness sequence based on etiquette books—and then relates them to each other. Finding that »both sequences share a temporal intertwinement and content-related dimensions,« his analysis makes his hypothesis plausible.

In her article »Global Historical Sociology and *Connected* Gender Sociologies,« *Heidemarie Winkel* discusses the question of how global historical sociology matters for gender sociology. Building on a critical discussion of the marginal role that historical sociology, and particularly colonial histories, play for gender sociology, she argues that a global, decolonial historical sociology of gender can make visible the continuation of colonial epistemologies in today's societies as well as gender sociology's own rootedness in a colonial body of »white« gender knowledge. At the same time, she shows how such an approach can help decolonize the knowledge reservoir of gender sociology and contribute to a deeper understanding of the current (re)nationalization of gender.

Laura Benítez-Cojúlun's article on »The History of Epigenetics from a Sociological Perspective« straddles the disciplinary boundaries in an

original and innovative way as it does not, as usual, merely add historical depth to the development of a scientific discipline—the history of knowledge in the field of epigenetics—but tests, from a sociological point of view, how this evolution and development of an important field of disciplinary knowledge can be explained in a systematic way. She does this by combining a sociological learning-theoretical framework inspired by the idea of communities of communication with an evolution-theoretical framework focusing on the process of how structures of aggregate learning are taken up by the functional system of science.

In his article »Secularization as Historical Struggle,« *Sebastian Matthias Schlerka* presents a historical-sociological approach to secularization phenomena. Building on Bourdieu's praxeology, he first outlines a conflict-centered approach according to which secularization is about the struggle for the legitimate meaning of religion, drawing on empirical research by other scholars for evidence supporting his approach. He then argues that »sociology alone cannot provide a sufficiently good account of phenomena of secularization,« which is why he supplements his approach with a historical perspective, using a reading of Bourdieu focused very much on change rather than on reproduction. In this way, he offers a framework for further study of religious change from the perspective of historical sociology.

Prof. Dr. Ursula-Mense-Petermann, Director of Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology and Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University:
ursula.mense@uni-bielefeld.de.

Sebastian Matthias Schlerka, Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology and Faculty for Sociology and Center for the Interdisciplinary Research on Religion and Society (CIRRuS), Bielefeld University:
sebastian_matthias.schlerka@uni-bielefeld.de.

Prof. Dr. Thomas Welskopp, Deputy director of Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology and Faculty for History, Philosophy, and Theology, Bielefeld University: thomas.welskopp@uni-bielefeld.de.