





Picture: Three famous anthropologists of the past

But it gets much worse. Typical textbooks are written as though the history of the social sciences was just a succession of thinkers or paradigms: "In the beginning were the evolutionists, they claimed this and that. Then came the functionalists who proposed this other thing and that one different thing. They were then replaced by structuralists." And so on.

My main problem with this kind of history is that it is not written from today's perspective. It does not make use of contemporary concepts and theories. The consequence is that you lose a big part of what makes the history of science so interesting which is to see how people discovered what we consider today as the main problems and how they prepared the way for what we consider to be the best theories. You also lose the sense of progress, the interesting succession of conjectures and refutations. In other words, you lose the "blissful click" and the "satisfying aha!"

In the natural sciences, by contrast, scientific work is put into today's perspective. In biology for instance, we learn about the history of the discovery of the theory of natural selection in the light of modern genetics and modern paleontology. We can see which problems Darwin had to face (he could not see the genes for instance) and why Lamarck was on a wrong track (because he did not consider selection). We also see how Darwin's concept paved the way toward new concepts such as reproductive success, evolutionary stable strategies, or the modern gene-centered view of evolution.

Why is there a difference between the natural and the social sciences? Are the social sciences so alien to the idea of progress and discoveries? I don't think so. I think that there is a story to be told about in which it would be shown how ancient scientists tackled the same questions as today and how their answers are related to today's theories. For instance, there would be a great story to tell about the problem of cooperation, the [prisoner's dilemma](#), the [tragedy of the commons](#) and the [supply of public goods](#), starting with Hobbes and his institutional solution (the [Leviathan](#)) and continuing on through [Hardin](#) and [Ostrom](#). On a related topic, there are many similarities to be uncovered between [Franck](#) and [Trivers](#)'s modern theory of moral emotions as an adaptation to enhance one's moral reputation and Montaigne or Hume's reflections on the imperfection of purely Machiavellian strategies ([David Gauthier](#)'s [Moral by Agreement](#) is wonderful example of a history of cooperation—as well as a great theory of morality—informed by modern theory of games).



Pictures: Ancient and modern ways of studying the supply of public goods

Similarly, it would be interesting (as I suggested in an [earlier post](#)) to compare the modern theory of massive modularity and the XVIIIth century's theory of the plurality of passions (on this matter, the only good history of psychology from today's perspective that I know is the one by Jon Elster on [the study of emotions by Aristotle and the French moralists](#); see also his recent work on [Tocqueville as a social scientist](#)). We may find that Aristotle or Descartes's carving up of mental functions map very

well onto modern evolutionary psychology, or that Hume and Reid were [the precursors of the study of epistemic vigilance](#) (or, as Ryan Nichols told us recently on this blog, that Hume was a [supporter of the by-product theory of religion](#)).

What do you think, dear readers? Have you encountered the kind of history of social sciences I'm thinking of?

If you have not, but if you think that such kind of a history is possible, I propose to contribute to this story yet to be told by relating your own research to the anthropologists philosophers of the past?

In the meantime, I'll do my share of the work. In the next couples of days, I'll try to convince you that one can find the precursors of concepts such as reflective knowledge, ultimate causes, mirror neurons and moral modules more than two hundreds years ago. To do so, I'll focus on one man, who is a famous economist, but ([again](#)), an unknown anthropologist: Adam Smith.

I like the detours through Arabic and Chinese science (and always regret their neglected role). And of course, I like the history of science itself: how problems are discovered (why do organs seem to have a function?), hypotheses proposed along the way (the heritability of acquired characteristics for instance) and explanations found (natural selection)—what Steven Pinker calls the