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A Science of Society?

Controversies over the Possibility of Social-Scientific Knowledge around 1900

April 13 – 14, 2018

Department of Philosophy
University of Vienna
Lecture room 3D
3rd Floor
Universitätsstraße 7
1010 Vienna

Organization: Martin Kusch, Elisabeth Nemeth

Conception: Martin Kusch, Elisabeth Nemeth,
Johannes Steizinger, Bastian Stoppelkamp,
Martin Strauss

FRIDAY 13

09.15–10.30: Natàlia Cantó Milà (Barcelona):
*Georg Simmel's Relational Approach
to Sociology and Social Thought*

10.45–12.15: Martin Kusch (Wien):
*The Development of Simmel's Social Theory
(1892–1908): From Moral Science to Sociology*

14.00–15.15: Martin Strauss (Wien/Paris):
*Reconsidering Simmel's Participation
in *L'Année sociologique**

15.30–16.45: Wolf Feuerhahn (Paris):
*An Alternative Cartography of German-Speaking
Sociology (1875–1908)*

17.00–18.15: Elisabeth Nemeth (Wien):
*Tracing Ernst Mach in Otto Neurath's Attempt
to Re-define the Object of Economics*

SATURDAY 14

09.30–10.45: Bastian Stoppelkamp (Wien):
*Vienna Naturalism and the Austrian Roots
of the Sociology of Knowledge*

11.00–12.15: Monika Wulz (Zürich):
*Towards a Political Economy of Knowledge:
Ernest Solvay's Energetic Sociology*

14.00–15.15: Caterina Zanfi (Wuppertal):
*The Social as a Function of the Vital.
Bergson's Answer to the Debate on
Biological Sociology*

15.30–16.45: Johannes Steizinger (Wien):
*Society from the Perspective of Life:
Erich Rothacker's Cultural Anthropology*

17.00–17.30: General Discussion

Although sociology emerged as a distinct discipline more than a hundred years ago, some basic questions about its foundations and scientific status have persisted to this day. Sociologists and philosophers have never stopped debating whether knowledge of human action and society can meet the standards set by the natural sciences. For instance, are (at least some of) the results of the social sciences "objective", "neutral", "replicable", or "law-like"? And if the answer is negative, how can sociological results be justified?

Given the prestige of the natural sciences in early-twentieth-century culture it was almost inevitable that they functioned as a model or foil for the social sciences. Today this issue is often discussed using the opposition between "naturalism" and "anti-naturalism". Unfortunately, this usage is often historically insensitive. It also tends to leave out the role of other reference points, such as philosophy, psychology, history and economics.

There are many other important concepts and distinctions, too, that are relevant for understanding the social sciences, and that call for a proper historical analysis of their changing uses and meanings: for instance, "humanities vs. the (natural) sciences", "explaining vs. understanding", or "holism vs. individualism".

We also need a better grasp of how epistemology interacts with politics: What follows politically from granting or denying sociological inquiry the status of a science? Early sociologists were keenly aware of this issue. They also asked whether political action can be based on social-scientific knowledge and what role this knowledge might play in political struggles.

This workshop aims to shed new light on the debates around 1900 and to meet some of the desiderata listed above. It will do so in a cross-cultural and international perspective.