

Making the Social World Objective (Zurich, 10–11 Nov 21)

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Making the Social World Objective. Theoretical, Practical, and Visual Forms of Social and Economic Knowledge, 1850-2000

From the 1850s onwards, “the social” gradually came to prominence as an object of study in industrializing and industrialized countries. As the “sciences of the social” acquired a growing legitimacy as disciplines, new ways of understanding and analyzing economic and social phenomena emerged. This dynamic rested on the development of new approaches to the objective observation of social facts, and these approaches were founded on methods conceived of as rational, whether or not they made use of quantification. During the same period, there was an increase in the production of economic and social statistics; the use of this tool of knowledge spread among many actors, both public and private, and became a central element in public administration, commercial enterprises, and scientific circles. Reformers, who were particularly active in the spread of these new theoretical and practical forms of knowledge, strove to give a scientific character to welfare provision for the destitute, in order to escape the pitfalls of charity. These men and women, who contributed to the introduction of the social sciences into the political arena, also actively participated in devising the categories of vulnerable, at risk, or dangerous populations, and in bringing these new classifications into the juridical and administrative spheres. In this way, the capacity to grasp the economy and society became a major issue in the elaboration of measures for social protection, even providing justification for them.

The emergence of these forms of knowledge as a guide to various forms of action (institutional or grassroots) was accompanied by the creation of means of representing and communicating them to diverse audiences. More particularly, images played a more and more important role in the ways in which general representations of the economic and social world were devised and in guiding how it was understood. For example, pioneering photographic surveys were carried out by social museums to document the living conditions of the working class, while labour and consumption statistics started to be represented visually.

The main tool for an objective approach to “the social” that was available to experts, to those involved in government administration and politics, and to subordinated or marginalized groups, was to represent it in words, numbers, or images. This conference proposes to return to these manifold strategies and methods for objectifying and visualizing the social that were developed from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Proposals for contributions to the conference could address one of the following three themes (though these should not be taken as exhaustive):

1. Social Objectivity at the Intersection of the Practical and Theoretical Sciences

In the case of statistics, as in that of other tools for grasping social phenomena (e.g., empirical observations, working class family budgets, etc.), the practical and theoretical sciences met and influenced each other. These tools of knowledge were fashioned and put to use not just by the state but also by learned societies and reforming groups; and even as the science of statistics was widely adopted, it became the subject of debates and controversies, testifying to its broader social implications.

Contributions could address the following questions: How did different groups of producers of knowledge collaborate? What was the impact of the intersection of different objectives (the management of society versus the development of scientific disciplines) on the making of the social sciences and their methods? What do the discourses about these tools for apprehending reality reveal to us? In what way did they defend (or not) the ideal of objectivity or neutrality implied by these sciences? What transfers and reappropriations of knowledge were at work within and between these different groups and disciplines?

2. Practical and Activist Sciences: Objectifying the Social at the Margin

The work of observing society and the economy was sometimes carried out by groups or individuals in subordinate positions or at the margins of the sites of production of dominant systems of knowledge. Beginning in the 1850s, various actors elaborated new social sciences with the goal of objectifying their material conditions and of developing solutions and/or formulating demands, as in, for example, the work done by reforming women as part of philanthropic work focusing on disadvantaged social groups. How did “outsider” and/or subordinate actors conceptualize these newly elaborated forms of knowledge? How did activist knowledge and practical knowledge meet and articulate each other? How did tacit knowledge and common sense interact? How did the observation and analysis of social facts permit actors at the margin or in subordinate positions to legitimize a critical thinking and formulate demands? How were these forms of knowledge diffused and adopted?

3. Circulations of Knowledge about the Social World: Statistical Imaginaries and Visual Representations

From the 1850s onwards, images have played a crucial role in the objectivation and circulation of economic and social knowledge. Certain institutions, following the example of the Musée Social in Paris, contributed to giving a tangible and material form (e.g., graphical charts, photographs, reliefs, and statistical mechanisms) to principles drawn from the new sciences of the social world, and participated in giving them an existence in the public sphere. Contributions could address the conditions of production of these visual forms of social knowledge, as well as the ways in which they were adopted by some reformers, facing the conflicting imperative to make science and to contribute to the democratization of knowledge. For whom were these forms of visual representation intended, and in what social spaces were they circulated? To what extent did they contribute to forging a representation of forms of social knowledge that was considered objective, and by what means? What other tools – technical, discursive, or material – were they associated with, and how were they perceived by those who used them?

Proposals of 300–500 words, accompanied by a short biographical notice, should be sent until June 15, 2021, to the following address: claire-lise.deblue@uzh.ch

Decisions will be announced no later than July 1, 2021.

The conference will take place at the University of Zurich in early November, 2021. Travel and

accommodation costs will be borne by the conference organizers. We are considering the possibility of publishing the contributions presented at the conference.

Organizers: Dr. Claire-Lise Debluë, Dr. Alix Heiniger, and Laure Piguet, in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Matthieu Leimgruber of the History Department/Forschungstelle für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte at the University of Zurich, the Department of History at the University of Fribourg, and with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Reference:

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