I
Centres for interdisciplinary and advanced study in the social sciences and humanities have spread and grown around the world in the past 50 years or so, as Bjorn Wittrock (2002) has shown. Like many people, I have had the pleasure of being part of several of them at various times, including Sussex University’s attempt to create interdisciplinary schools, where I was a graduate student, a year at the Centre for Comparative Research in History, Society, and Culture at University of California, Davis, which had been inspired in part by the work of Alvin Gouldner, who founded the journal Theory and Society in 1974, and a long-term relationship with the Research School of Social Sciences, which is (or was) part of the Institute for Advanced Studies at ANU, Canberra.

All of this experience has taught me many things but the one I want to dwell on today is that of inter-disciplinarity in social and human studies. The attempts to institutionalize inter-disciplinarity in these and many other places was less than successful it seems to me. The traditional disciplines always seem to lurk just beneath the surface and at Sussex, for example, re-asserted themselves quite strongly. In some advanced studies centres, on the other hand, like the National Humanities Research Centre at Chapel Hill, SCASS at Uppsala, the Helsinki Collegium, and here at IASR, where there are no separate departments as such, people are free to pursue their own research interests in whatever field or discipline they feel part of, taking account of any themes that are designated from time to time. If we ignore the institutionalized disciplines to which scholars formally belong, however, we do find a great deal of work being done in such centres and elsewhere that does not fit easily into any traditional discipline.

I’ll give you one example. One of my research interests is in the history of indigenous/settler hybridized economies and societies on the expanding frontiers of the settler world in the 18th to 20th Centuries. Hybridization occurred as the world market began to penetrate into new, remote, lands in the temperate zones of European colonialism. These were dynamic, rapidly changing zones of overlapping customary and capitalist economic and social relations and
cultures. Agency existed in many forms, as did conflict, violence, domination, and dispossession, not all of it by the settlers. In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in these historical processes. Most of these scholars have been located in History departments, some in Sociology and Anthropology Departments, and even a few in Economics Departments or research centres. One of the recent seminal contributions has been made by a Finnish scholar, Pekka Hämaäläinen, who wrote his PhD at Helsinki and was recently appointed to the Rhodes chair of American history in Oxford. His book on the Commanche Empire of the 18th and 19th Centuries in New Mexico (Hämaäläinen 2008) is an excellent example of interdisciplinarity leading to discovery. Another example is the extensive work of Jon Altman, a research professor in the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at ANU who has developed a hybridization argument about settler/indigenous interrelationships in Australia (Altman, 2004, 2010; cf also Lloyd 2012). An example of Hybridization is shown in Fig 1.

Indeed, to work in this field and many similar ones, the old disciplinary boundaries have to be abandoned. Hämaäläinen’s and Altman’s work combines political theory, sociology, anthropology, economics, geography, and of course history. They say they work in the borderlands. It’s my contention that we can see such work as exemplifying the Social Science History commitment to breaking down discipline boundaries and studying societalisation and societal history as much more complex, multi-layered and multi-linear, processes than the old disciplines could deal with alone.

Fig 1. The hybrid production system of Van Dieman’s Land c1820 (Lloyd, 2012, p 26)

To make this argument more strongly and then try to move towards a somewhat radical proposition, we should ask a basic question about the philosophical foundations of the socio-human studies: does the world of human social structure and interaction exist in reality as semi-autonomous economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual domains? Of course not, is the sometimes stated answer. These are not just abstractions, it is said, but convenient, intellectually created categories. Nevertheless, they are ones which, over centuries, we have come to believe, explicitly or implicitly, do contain descriptive empirical validity of how the social world is actually structured and determined. The stubbornly persistent system of institutionalized disciplines that most of us work within seems to reinforce constantly the idea of the empirical validity of this disciplinary matrix. The
intuition that many scholars have is that the disciplines do carve the social world at its natural joints. The self-referential, circular, system of knowledge construction within the disciplinary matrix naturally reinforces that view. That is, the received ontology and epistemology of the social reinforce each other.

But that received view of disciplinary circularity and self-groundedness has also constantly been challenged in various ways over the centuries, as I want to do here. I think the received view is not serving us well as a global society today. Many of us are trapped within it, as a kind of Weberian rationalist iron cage that serves the limited interests of most scholars for practical purposes as well as governments and the capitalist world system, but does not best serve the advancement of social explanation and understanding or the interests of humanity. For example, the orthodox economic understanding of the world economy fails to grasp the significance of institutions, cultures, politics, and history. The heterodox economics streams, with their roots in historical, Marxist, Polanyian, Keynesian, and evolutionary thinking are breaking down these disciplinary boundaries.

The disciplinary cage is highly influential and not sufficiently challenged. Most educated, middle class, individuals in ultramodern affluent Western societies live in a world they perceive and understand through a prism of explicit or implicit social philosophies, theories, understandings, statistical data, and socio-historical explanations that are, through time, their own collective products as a social class. This formal intellectual framing, including the disciplines, is now more significant than ever because governments situate their policies within such frameworks. Government actors – politicians and bureaucrats – are also intellectually formed by these frameworks. The bureaucratic state and the higher education industry now work in close co-operation, or, to put it more accurately, Western universities have increasingly become since the 1980s the co-opted, uncritical instruments of the state. Their social role as necessary sources of radical critique, never fully realized of course, has declined from the high point in the postwar decades. Can we break out of this cage?

In fact, the battle for the foundational core of social knowledge and its socio-political function, which has been going on for more than a century, is hotting up. But recently it has had the unfortunate consequence of pulling social understanding apart into at least three, often mutually incomprehensible, approaches – affective, statistical-individualist, and critical realist. These roughly correspond to common sense hermeneutics, official empiricism, and radical dialectics. Affective socio-historical understandings try to recreate somehow the emotional and personal feeling of actions, events, and experiences in order to understand them (Agnew 2007, Robinson, 2010). Ever since the Neo-Kantians of the early 20th Century and associated defences of phenomenology and hermeneutics by Weber and others, and later R G Collingwood’s philosophy of imaginary re-thinking, the culturist and affective stream of thought has positioned itself against the ideas of objectivity and social aggregation. Personal understandings and beliefs are the source of affective knowledge and this kind of knowledge has to be examined ethnographically, phenomenologically, and individually. At the opposite end of the spectrum, positivist economics, economic history, and sociology have defended statistical aggregation as the only empirically-verifiable foundation for objective knowledge, drawing the supposed but mistaken lesson of the natural science route to positive knowledge. This approach usually lacks any critical perspective on social power; and its anthropological form sometimes reduces people to manifestations of biological drives (Sahlins 2013). The cultural studies approach does usually take a critical view of both aggregation and power.
Positioned somewhere in the middle has been a stream of critical realism that tries to adopt a skeptical and critical attitude to empirical evidence and takes the view that causal power, rather than sensory perception alone, is the index of social reality, a social reality that is deeper than the surface manifestations of statistical aggregates of behaviour and cultural forms and is non-linear in a dialectical sense. This is a radical approach in the true sense of the word for it tries to uncover the non-empirical but real relational structures of power and agency and the ongoing structuring processes of social construction of relations and meanings in whatever context is being examined. Hämälainen’s discovery of the Commanche empire, Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of the judgment of taste (Bourdieu 1984), and Robert Brenner’s rediscovery of the rising merchant class basis of the English revolution of the 1640s (Brenner 1993) are three impressive cases of what a critical realist perspective can bring to historical enquiry. And a critical realist approach to society certainly does not deny the power of cultural affinities and beliefs in structuring social relations through collective agency.

Although it sometimes seems the critical realist form of enquiry is losing the new battle of the methods in the academy, the appearance of victory for the frameworks of affective enquiry, on one hand, and rational choice and econometrical statics on the other, is actually illusory. Neither really reflects, I believe, the intuitive understandings of society that ordinary actors have as their common sense. That is, the intuitive common sense of society is that social relational structures, social positional power, and irreducible social forces, are real and determinate of the lives of all persons. And the corresponding feeling of powerlessness is widespread. This feeling of powerlessness has grown, I suggest, to enmesh everybody because of the growing extent of individuation and capitalist domination within ultramodernity and the scale of the economic and environmental crises that we are now experiencing. The failure to tackle the twin crises by the ruling elites of the world is striking evidence of the failure of the ‘official’ theory of static individualism and rational choice to explain how society really works and changes and therefore of what must be done.

II

So, the time has come to reinvigorate the more powerful alternative – critical realist social science history – and the political movement that it implicitly supports. We have to make a counter argument, on the same terrain as the dominant ideology, that socio-historical research and writing can make a difference not just to the understanding of but to the re-formation of democratic society, as Wolfgang Streeck (2013), Colin Crouch (2004, 2013), and many others have been arguing (cf Lloyd, 2013).

This implies an answer to a prior question: can the study of and commentary about society by scholars and intellectuals make a significant impact on collective social behaviour via inspiring new political choices and social agency and therefore on social structuring processes? What is the socio-political significance of intellectuals? There have been two broad answers to this old problem. First has been the structural/evolutionary attitude that ideological and intellectual thought is largely irrelevant to the deep structures of social life, social interaction, and social evolution. That is, social life continues at various levels in a deep-time, structured, and evolutionary way, regardless of systematic, explicit human thought about it, especially in the short term. Second has been the view that ideological views, academic/intellectual enquiry, and public commentary have enormous potential and sometimes great actual power to change the social world by influencing individual and
collective behaviour in social movements, power structures, policies, and governance (cf Bourdieu 1998).

While these answers may seem strongly opposed – structural/evolutionary versus agential/political – in fact they should be understood as actually coming together in an agreement in a fundamental way that is not immediately obvious. That is, the old supposed problem of the role of enquiry, science, and ideology in social life is not actually a real problem at all for social life is both impossible without them but also exists and evolves without most people having explicit knowledge of them. Social life cannot exist, of course, without common sense social knowledge and understandings, which strongly influence agency; and social reproduction and transformation occur only within a pre-existing structural and ideational context, including common sense understandings as well as an intellectual/scientific milieu in modern society. A fundamental task of social enquiry, and therefore of political action is, to examine and critique the many forms of ideational/cultural contextualization of social behaviour, as Pierre Bourdieu and Charles Tilly so extensively and persuasively argued in many writings. In particular, as professional social enquirers we have to grasp what our roles can be and actually are within the world in which we live. We have to understand that we have little choice about this for we are socially-embedded as individuals and groups and we should be very aware of that and of the potential power it gives us, a power that can continue to grow within the ultramodern condition of sceptical doubt, and even cynicism. Our power grows from empirical knowledge and explanations that must transcend philosophies and ideologies. Philosophies and ideologies have indeed dominated the world but our task is to explain the world and, through our explanations, provide the foundations for changing the world.

III

In earlier eras, social philosophies (including religion) rather than social science were the dominant ideational forms. The so-called Age of Enlightenment Reason and of the philosophes had an enormous impact on the social world through the French Revolutionary activists. Afterwards, with the reaction and Restoration of central elements of the old regime and subsequent Bourgeois Age, philosophies seemed to have declined in social importance. This supposition of 19th century stultification is, of course, disputable, given that it was the era of Hegel, Saint-Simon, Mill, Marx, and Weber, among many others, but we can see how the great transformational age of capitalist industrialization, which began about the beginning of the 19th Century, squeezed the space for philosophies to be activated and opened the space for material interests and science. Men of practical affairs came to dominate politics, ideas, and government in a way that they had not in the 18th and early 19th Centuries. The issues that dominated political ideologies and debates in the parliaments, governments, and universities of Europe and America in the 19th century were quite different from those of the French Revolutionary era and earlier.

During the French Revolutionary decade each phase was dominated by individuals and groups who came to prominence driven by their philosophically-derived views of social order and governance. Initially Montesquieu, then Rousseau, and later Voltaire were chief influences. As the 19th Century developed and industrialization spread within the North Atlantic region, classical political economy came to the fore as the ideology of the age. By the late 19th Century, ideas about the practical organization of society and government, including liberalism and socialism, became highly influential. Indeed, the second half of the
19th Century was the age of the emergence of social science, the classical foundations of which had emerged in Germany and Britain by the mid-19th century out of political economy, social conceptualisations, and socio-economic statistics. The social science of the German Historical School, J S Mill, the Marxists, the English Historical Economists, and Max Weber, tried to combine historical and present perspectives to build theories of the dynamic processes of industrializing and modernizing societies and their deep, evolving roots out of traditional agrarian structures.

Thus by the late 19th century, social science rather than social philosophy became the animator of themes of governance. Just as the material world could be reformed and moulded through the application of chemistry, physics, and mechanical engineering, so society could be re-formed through some combination of ideological commitments, social science, and policy. The apogee of this view was sovet communism. But this rationalist dominance engendered an anti-rationalist reaction, which had always been there beneath the surface, bursting into great prominence as a consequence of the failure of capitalist governance, prosperity, and rationality after 1914. This was Romantic Nationalism. In its Fascist form it tried to control the world but fortunately was defeated. The victor was resurgent capitalism, with its bourgeois liberalism, rational individualism, and technocratic social science, and for a time communism, also a rationalistic and technocratic system, shared the victory but in a stunted form.

The new social science, practiced as the ultimate form of modernist engineering of a rational society using abstraction, general concepts, quantification, and deductive logic, abandoning the past, it began to split from historical enquiry, which in some places began methodologically to coalesce around an anti-science, humanistic, methodology. This division grew so that by the second half of the 20th Century it was the disciplinary normality for a gulf of understanding to exist between social science and history and even between various branches of social science. As Ernest Gellner argued in Language and Solitude, the split between atomists and organicists has bedeviled sociological enquiry and prevented the development of a truly explanatory historical social science.

In this intellectual context and in the global geopolitical and economic context of the 1970s there was the beginnings of a movement towards re-uniting social science and history, described variously as historical sociology, historical social science, historical economics, historical anthropology, historical geography, and social science history. The influence of the French Annales scholars played an important role in this. The world geo-politico-economic context was significant because social and historical enquiry was being re-examined under the impact of the Cold War, the 1970s global recession, and the conflicts within the developing world over ideological and developmental issues. Old, long buried, theoretical themes of conflict, change, and dynamics came back to the fore to criticise the structural-functionalism of the post-war decades. In particular, a new form of Marxism was developed in the West as an antidote to Stalinism, Western ahistoricism, and methodological individualism. Barrington Moore, E P Thompson, Alvin Gouldner, Perry Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Immanuel Wallerstein, Clifford Geertz, Ernest Gellner, Alain Touraine, Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Tilly, and of course Michel Foucault, were leading contributors in various ways.

The founding animation came, then, in part at least, from discontent with the widening divorce between history and theory that had begun in the late 19th Century and from the
corresponding desire to build a new, synthetic, interdisciplinary foundation for unification. As the years and decades have gone on since that beginning and the social science history ‘movement’ has spread and grown, the question of the scientific and/or intellectual success of the new approach to unification has become very relevant. To what extent has the ‘movement’ succeeded, intellectually and institutionally?

In fact, I argue, Social Science History has largely failed institutionally and has had only partial success scientifically. The kind of ‘Copernican Revolution’ that the writers just mentioned together attempted to effect is still incomplete. Social Science History has not yet captured the universities, let alone the public mind. Was it possible to achieve the goal of reformation or was it always beyond reach? The reasons for this lack of success are many, including institutional barriers and rigidities and, most importantly, the failure to develop an agreed upon methodological foundation and any theoretical coherence. And it is no accident that the attempt to institute a radical reformation of ideas from the 1970s coincided with the rise of neo-liberal ideology and the denigration, especially in the Angloworld, of the social democratic state, the public universities, and the critical social sciences.¹ The reduction of the social embeddedness (to use Polanyi’s term) of the economy and the breaking of the restraints on the global expansion of capitalism in the 1990s reduced the space for a radical re-thinking of social understanding and social structuring.

Social Science History today, judging from the content of the journal Social Science History (first published 1975) and the titles of conference papers, has not developed a core but is rather an eclectic mix not significantly different from many other areas of the social and historical studies as represented in many similar journals.² But given that it’s certainly possible to break down the barriers between the disciplines, as some scholars have done very successfully, such as those aforementioned and William Sewell more recently (Sewell 2005), the reasons for the eclecticism are, I argue, to do with the excessive tolerance that characterizes the liberal humanities. Intellectual tolerance in turn could be a product of lack of confidence in the face of the aggressive imperialism of the quantifying rational-choice individualism of the dominant ideology.

In any case, the outcome has been a ‘slippage’ towards the kind of history writing that is ‘normal’ elsewhere to the neglect of the social science part of the synthesis; and insofar as social science methodology and theory have been retained there is no coherent unified framework. Anything is possible. Thus among those professing to do Social Science History there are postmodern sceptics of social reality and critical realists and structuralist defenders of social reality. There are vehement rejecters of quantification and vehement defenders of quantification. There are those who rely upon common sense notions about social reality and those who explicitly use structural theory. There are atomists and organicists. No common threads of methodology and theory run through the writings of

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¹ Margaret Thatcher and her education minister Keith Joseph led an extraordinary attack on social science in 1980s Britain. In thrall to Hayekian individualism she declared in 1987 in Women’s Own magazine that ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.’

those professing to be social science historians. The only thing that holds the ‘movement’
together is tolerance. But that is not enough.

Perhaps all this was inevitable. To build a coherent, agreed upon, framework for unifying
social science and history was always difficult for the fundamental reason that the
sociosphere has resisted all attempts to build a coherent general methodology and theory.
Methodologically, no lasting agreement about the fundamental ontological and
epistemological foundations of social science and history have ever emerged. Nevertheless,
most historians as such, excluding those who are actually offshoots of social sciences
directly, such as economic historians, do more or less agree on something fundamental that
unites their discourse – a central concern with the narrative or events and changing structural
processes over time. Social scientists, on the other hand, have a (less defined) central
concern with ‘society’ or social reality and are not centrally concerned with time or change.
The past/present distinction has implicitly divided them.

IV

If social science history per se, deeper and wider than the tolerant, eclectic, conferences, is to
survive and prosper it has to find its true core and that core can be found only through the
conceptualization, theorization, and empirical study of the historical, evolving, dialectic of
the socio-cultural-economic contexts of human actions, events, and agency, and the
reproduction and transformation of those contexts through all kinds of behaviour. This
should be the Manifesto of Social Science History. Building contextual socio-historical
science is still the task before us, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Ernest Gellner, Clifford
Geertz, Charles Tilly, William Sewell, and others knew and tried so hard to achieve.

So, today, in the era of social science, social movements, social skepticism, and systemic
crisis, the problem is of how to steer a line between ideological frameworks and social
research that strives to explain the historical and evolving realities of the multi-layered and
multifaceted social world. This brings me back to the fundamental point I want to
emphasise. How could Social Science History possibly change the world? More accurately,
we should ask how SSH research and knowledge can make a significant difference to
structural transformation through conscious collective human action.

The fundamental mechanism of social change today is what can be called ‘the levers of state
governance’, to use a somewhat mechanical analogy, and the background motivation of the
operators of those levers is their social ideology and theory. Governance can also be called
‘regime regulation’ and all structures as organized entities are characterized by a regulatory
regime that gives them organizational integrity. The connection between powerful regime
actors and so-called ‘intellectuals’ is the key relationship here.

The inherent intentionality of social research and social enquiry by intellectuals should be to
explain the fundamental nature of socio-political organization and regulation, of social
behaviour and agency, and of social change through regime change, as the classical founders
of social science in the 19th Century saw very clearly. The strength of the explanation and
understanding lends potential strength to the capacity to affect conscious interventions into
the processes of social reproduction and change. The best example of this kind of approach
that I’m aware of is the work of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Köln,
led by Wolfgang Streeck.
Interventions can occur on two main levels in the world today – socio-political movements and socio-political policy of governments. The two should overlap but they are often opposed. The potential power of socio-political movements to influence governance is perhaps greater than ever and we have seen recently many semi-unorganised social movements. That is, consciousness of how societies and governments work and of how collective agency can be influential has grown around the world, such that the whole world today seems to be in a state of constant local contention about governance. Paradoxically perhaps, globalization has made possible both a resurgence of state power, often corrupted and anti-democratic, as Colin Crouch (2004, 2013) has been arguing, as well as an upsurge of opposition to it. And the policies of governments, both progressive and repressive, have become more deliberately based upon official social research.

Indeed, a vast commitment to social research now lies at the heart of governments, especially in advanced countries. Much of that research consists of collection of statistical data, especially economic and health data, about the societies in which they operate. And indeed, we now know also, thanks to Assange and Snowden, that government spying agencies and organisations like Yahoo and Google collect and store vast amounts of electronic data. We are really now in the era of BIG DATA (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013) with its own requirements and logic of universal surveillance, its inferred ontology of atomised social relations and digitised human attributes, and its complete commercialization of human life. The era of biopolitical control that Foucault foresaw is very much implicated in the logic of big data. The dystopic prophecies of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling have actually come to pass.

This current situation contrasts greatly with the policies of the French revolutionary regimes in the period from 1789 to 1799, which were very little or not at all based upon empirically-derived knowledge of the mechanisms and processes of social organization and governance. Rather, they, as revolutionaries, tried to implement philosophically-derived social ideologies through direct political action. An interesting comparison can be made with Sheri Berman’s argument about the failure of the leading social democrats in Weimar Germany to realize fully the primacy of politics and instead rely upon a too rigid form of Marxist theory to guide them. They paid a terrible price. This can also usefully be contrasted with the Arab Spring, which seems to be all about politics. It now seems pretty clear that accountable governance rather than social transformation is the main demand of the protestors. Demands to turn the world upside down are not widespread among the leaders of the Arab Spring. Either bourgeois normalization or Islamic normalization seem to be the main goals. That is, there seems to be a lack of social theory in their movement. The separation of social theory from politics seems to have been the problem in all these cases.

Despite the scale of ‘official’ objectivist social research today there is still a powerful ideological element in social policy, and it and empirical knowledge are open to critique, at least in Western countries. The Western state regime is not the immovable force that the

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3 As an aside, we could wonder if it could be possible in the future that researchers will be given access to NSA and Google electronic archives to examine the dynamics and networks of internet and telephone activity? And perhaps, once it’s completely privatized, the NSA will sell access to the data.
MENA states and China have. In this context, social science history can offer itself as indeed a superior research framework, better able to develop theory-rich knowledge of the structural/behavioural processes of the contemporary world.

V

We have to articulate a vision and conception, then, of interdisciplinary Social Science History, along the lines of the manifesto mentioned above, which is founded on appropriate ontology and epistemology of the social in a kind of Popperian commitment to the ethic of science as both skepticism and discovery. A critical realist approach is able to do this for it is committed to constant critique within a progressive research program of empirical discovery of the processes of change and stability within all social contexts from micro to macro to global.

This kind of Social Science History has an explicit or implicit politics of both science and of the real socio-political context of science. Critique of the implicit social assumptions in which science is conducted is always necessary. In *Language and Solidude*, Ernest Gellner’s powerful critique of the Central European Habsburg political and cultural context of the early 20th Century, in which many of the central themes of 20th Century thought were born – think of Kafka, Wittgenstein, Logical Positivism, Popper, Austro-Marxism, Malinowski, Hayek, Hirschman, Schumpeter (and not to mention Adolf Hitler) – is a good example of this kind of project.

Thus Social Science History as envisaged here is a critical realist research program in which the constant dialectic of structure, agency, and social reproduction, in multiple settings of behavior and culture – what can be called methodological structurism – strives to improve our knowledge incrementally and critically. The aim of constant improvement of understanding is the motivation and goal for research. The socio-political agenda of this research program is one of critique of intellectual and social power and domination, *a la* Foucault, Bourdieu, Brenner, Gellner, Streeck, and many others. A kind of progressive, radically liberal, social democratic politics is implicated in the idea of the methodological structurist agenda.

**Fig 2. Methodological Structurism (Lloyd 1993, p 46)**
Social Science History can change the world, then, in the double sense of the intellectual framework for social explanation and the political agendas for human flourishing of the sort articulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. We all have to make political choices that try to achieve better governance outcomes. Radical critique will always find the weaknesses in programmatic socio-political philosophies but the problem of how to act politically in particular circumstances and what the political goals should be will always remain.

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