

# **Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture**

# European Heritage in Economics and the Social Sciences

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## Volume 5

*Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture: Crossing Bridges*  
Jürgen G. Backhaus

**Political Economy, Linguistics  
and Culture  
Crossing Bridges**

*edited by*

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 Springer

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# Introduction

During the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century, the social sciences in general and economics in particular have undergone an enormous progress. This has led to something of an embarrassment of riches. While certain topics have been fully researched to the point where the marginal benefit from further research is approaching zero, others have remained largely underresearched or are being ignored altogether. It is this discrepancy which prompted the research paradigm of “Crossing Bridges.” This volume documents the efforts of ten authors who have joined forces in addressing this problem of underresearched topics.

Why could this situation occur? Five reasons come to mind. First, each social science has a history. In fact, the history of economic thought is much broader than the history of economic analysis, as Schumpeter had observed with the choice of the title of his classic.<sup>1</sup> Due to path dependence, research topics have been developed and continued as research ideas and topics for books and scholarly papers. What had not been in the focus of earlier scholars may not readily enter the discourse of academics today. There is hence a barrier to entry as far as topic choice is concerned. Language plays a big role. Until about 1937, the primary language of the social sciences and economics in particular was German. Then, it switched to English. But the different language communities, due to the growth of the discipline, continued to maintain their own research paradigms. This is why in Japan the history of economic thought, so I am told, is taught in terms of German history of economic thought, British history of economic thought, French history of economic thought, and so on. Indeed, the choice of topics in the Spanish academic community as compared to the German academic community or the Italian academic community is starkly different. Hence, language is another dividing and differentiating factor, another entry barrier. In particular, most academic economists today, whose lingua franca is English, have no access to the heritage of their discipline that is locked into the German script.

The nineteenth century also saw in Europe the formation of national identities which defined research programs to an extent. Due to previously mentioned reasons, therefore, there tended to emerge further differences in national research programs. The University of Macerata has emphasized these aspects of economic theory and national identity<sup>2</sup> and in particular different appointment

practices stimulate different research strategies by young academic scholars. This is, in particular, the case when universities have to follow particular guidelines that standardize their behaviour in a national area, be this because they are all state institutions or because they have to be accredited by a single or several similarly operating accrediting bodies.

The purpose of doing research may also play a role. The purpose can be, as in the case of basic research, simple scholarly curiosity, the best of motivations. But the purpose can also be defined externally. Think of the star wars economic research program funded during the Reagan years. The program was only a very small part of total money spent, but it changed the research landscape. This is true for other programs as well and actually has had the intended effect of those who sponsored the programs.

Finally, the science of state has now developed into a lot of different and differently operating disciplines with their own language, media of publications and research paradigms, to wit economics, business economics, management, marketing, transportation, personnel, finance, sociology, public administration, statistics, econometrics, and various others. Communication is not always a strong point between these disciplines. That is why some universities, such as Cornell, have excelled in developing interdisciplinary programs such as their western societies program.

The essays collected in this volume have been grouped in several parts.

The first paper (by Leland Yeager) makes the reasonable and often overlooked point that if there were a lingua franca based on the major natural (not constructed) languages, communication and the protection and tradition of the international heritage of knowledge would be much facilitated. This essay bridges the gap between economics and linguistics. Peter Senn, the author of important studies exploring the influence of particular scholars, an influence that is more likely to be ignored the bigger it is, since insights and methods are then taken for granted, poses the question of what “influence” actually means in the history of, for example, economic thought. This paper actually presents us a multiriver bridge across the social sciences including the philosophy of sciences. The third essay by Jürgen Backhaus provides a bridge between art and economics in terms of discussing a painting by Courbet, *L'Origine du Monde*, which has been widely discussed in the literature, although it has only recently become available to the public. This is a paradox in itself. Next to the picture, there is a literature proposing a particular point of view on social policy. Gustave Courbet, an artist, achieved such an impact by painting a picture to be hidden from public view.

The second set of papers, all by Mark Blum, tries to bridge in various ways the divide between cultural history and the social sciences. The first paper offers an interesting take on the so-called “Methodenstreit” between first Schmoller

and Menger, the Weber brothers, and an undisclosed adversary. The underlying cultural premises were different, he argues. The following two papers continue this line in terms of documenting the changing metaparadigms.

The third set of papers is in the public choice tradition conceived by its originator, Gordon Tullock, as a multidisciplinary exercise in itself. These papers, all coauthored by Jim Couch, provide first, and in particular, a link to history, discussing the peculiar implementation of the New Deal totally overlooked in contemporary macroeconomic teaching, second, another link to ecology by pointing out that the enforcement and implementation of environmental policy have little to do with their stated purpose, and third, a link to population studies by providing a similar exercise: an analysis of the implementation of immigration policies.

The series of these meetings is to be continued, and the reader finds a call for papers at the end of this book.

Erfurt, May 2007

Jürgen G. Backhaus

## NOTES

1. Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954.
2. See my paper: "Historical and Philosophical Theories of Money: Schmoller and Simmel Reconsidered," in: Vitantonio Gioia and Heinz D. Kurz (eds.), *Science, Institutional and Economical Development: The Contribution of the „German“ Economy and the Reception in Italy (1860–1930)* (Gli Italiani e la Scuola Storica Tedesca dell'Economia), Milano, Giuffrè, 2000, pp. 77–106.