



Towards an Integrated Political History: Bridging Disciplinary Divides

František STELLNER¹ 

¹Jan Evangelista University in Ústí nad Labem, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, Pasteurova 3571/13, 400 96, Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic, ✉ <mailto:frantisek.stellner@ujep.cz>

Abstract

The study focuses on the evolution of political history and the assessment of the perspectives of its further development. Since the second half of the 20th century, political history has been cultivated in three basic subfields: new political history, social political history, and cultural political history. Subsequently, the discussion turns to other subfields that are or could be used in the analysis of political history. Ultimately, the study proposes the idea of creating an "integrated" political history that would result from combining the strengths of different theoretical and methodological approaches, especially history, political science, economics, and sociology. Author has called for the creation of an "integrated" political history that would emerge by combining the strengths of different approaches. In particular, he argued for building a bridge between the new political history, political science, and political economy. This, however, would require scholars from each discipline to recognize that the other disciplines are not misguided or mistaken, but equal and worthy of the closest collaboration. It would also require the formation of interdisciplinary teams; in the case of political history, these teams would include political scientists, sociologists, economists, statisticians, lawyers, and anthropologists in addition to historians. Similarly, disciplinary barriers would have to be overcome in journals indexed in Web of Science and other databases. The emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach is nothing new in the social sciences and humanities, but the question is to what extent it has been feasible to present policy analysis from the theoretical and methodological perspectives of multiple disciplines.

Keywords

political history, new political history, social political history, cultural political history, political science, economics, 21st century

DOI: 10.62374/htr41w06



Introduction

Since its inception in the nineteenth century, traditional political history has focused primarily on the history of states and diplomacy, on the study of domestic and foreign policy at the level of states and the relations between them. They analyse politics as the interest-driven actions of individuals and institutions in the pursuit of power and for the benefit of the state; they analyse the political, administrative, and social institutions in which collective decisions are made or power is asserted and legitimised, as well as the emergence, structure, and transformations of government and the state. The "primacy of foreign policy" led to a narrowing of the field of research to the actions of states, nations, and their governments, with this field being identified with general history. This approach was characterised above all by a focus on discontinuity. One event could upset everything, one person who entered history could leave his or her mark on an entire epoch. This is consistent with the basic premise that individuals are the key to history (Lawrence, 2016; Stellner et al., 2023). According to M. Řepa (2009, p. 74), political history is based on "*a narrative sequence of events, working predominantly with individual actors, be they individuals (politicians, statesmen, diplomats) or social formations (states, nations)*". The German philosopher O. Spengler (2017, p. 774) even stated: "*The history of the world is and always will be the history of states*".

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the historiography of great politics was not the dominant approach in the field of historical research. Instead, constitutional history and intellectual history also emerged as prominent areas of inquiry. Dülmen (2003, p. 41) stated, that "*The criticism that political historiography dealing with states has always been limited to 'the history of battles and treaties' or to 'great men' overlooks the fact that broad approaches and integrative points of view also existed in the nineteenth century.*" Political history reconstructs causal chains of events with a focus on decisions and places more emphasis on decision-making. According to Mergel (2002), this view was dominant in German universities and stemmed from the German bourgeois tradition. In the Anglo-Saxon world, on the other hand, the dominant understanding of politics was more procedural, i.e. more interested in the process of politics than in its outcome (government by discussion, policymaking, the politics of).

In the 1960s there was a significant surge of criticism directed towards the field of political history in the West. The field was accused of focusing on historical events, describing the politics of great men and great cabinets, and ignoring social structural or economic determinants. It has been described as elitist, too fixated on great figures in great politics, psychologizing and overestimating the influence of individuals, and too narrative. In Germany, political historiography has even been accused of glorifying state power rather than analysing it (Stellner et al., 2023).



In France, this criticism reached its zenith in the verdict of the historians and historiographers of the Annales school, who asserted that political history is merely an "history of events" (event history), whereas it should be a structural history in the broadest sense, encompassing all spheres of life (Marcowitz, 2005). An alternative was proposed by Michel Foucault with his theoretical concept of governmentality (Martschukat, 2006). Hofmeyr (2021, p. 589) comments on his efforts: "*I contend that although Foucault's neoliberal governmentality lectures might be value-neutral, methodologically they remain a strategics of power/knowledge configurations imbued with the 'critical attitude' that asserts the right not to be governed like that.*"

Discussion

In the latter half of the twentieth century, three subfields of political history can be identified in historiography, although some reservations remain. These are the new political history, social political history, and cultural political history. As a general rule, these are not cooperating groups of scholars; on the contrary, they disrespect each other and accuse each other of theoretical ignorance or distraction from the essentials.

Political historians defend the "relative autonomy" of politics from social history, especially in the field of international relations. Concurrently, however, they have "modernised" by establishing a subfield of new political history (political history in the modern sense), relinquishing the assumption of an inherent correlation between state and history (Kousser, 1976; Cornelissen, 2000; Frevert & Haupt, 2005; Soběhart, 2009; Craig, 2010). Hans-Ulrich Thamer (1990, p. 55) characterised it as a "*history of political action*", which by no means assumes that only the state can act politically: "*Political action arises not only from the state and its institutions, but also from political and social groups and forces*". Baker (1999) has proposed that the new approach to political history is characterised by attention to systematic patterns in political behaviour, the use of social science methods and concepts, and a focus on parties and voters as measurable links between popular political behaviour and policy. Those who espoused this approach in the United States placed considerable emphasis on the behaviour and motivations of voters, rather than focusing solely on the actions of politicians. The researchers employed a plethora of quantitative methods and integrated social issues, particularly those pertaining to ethnicity and religion.

The specialist in modern German history, Andreas Hillgruber (1973), exemplifies a representative of the emerging trend in political history that did not diverge significantly from the established approaches. He wrote of a "modern political history" that was based on the findings of structural historical research, took into account the social context of important political decisions, and explored the scope for action of heads of state in foreign policy and the domestic political weight of the foreign policy decisions of the great powers. He was unequivocal in his rejection of the national-conservative and



national-liberal traditions of traditional political history. He also rejected the axiomatic "primacy of foreign policy" and clearly rejected the "men who make history" approach. But the leader of the Bielefeld School, Hans-Ulrich Wehler (1975), criticised him for failing to consider the merits of a concept that sought to link domestic and foreign policy, or for explaining politics in socio-economic terms and emphasising the domestic constraints on foreign policy.

The advent of the new social history has seen the introduction of a number of innovative methodological concepts, which have collectively served to make social history the most dynamic and rapidly evolving approach in historical scholarship over the past forty years. The focus shifted from ideas to structures, especially organizations and institutions, or to a race/class/gender model. They understood political change as a consequence of socio-economic conditions in particular. So-called historical social science or social history dominated West German scholarship. Representatives of the so-called Bielefeld School integrated political, social, economic, and cultural history into a single whole and attempted to create a new paradigm of history through various theoretical models (Etzemüller, 2002; Pešek, 2006).

The proponents of the new social history were also among the first to engage in a methodological clash with political history over the primacy of historical research. They were successful in breaking with the "traditionalist" approach to political history that had prevailed since the mid-nineteenth century (Etzemüller, 2001). Social political historians view political action as a consequence of socio-economic conditions that, if not determine that action, at least predetermine it and pre-structure decisions. As Wehler (1975) posits, an understanding of modern political history as an integral part of social history, and the assumption of a specifically modern tendency to blur the boundaries between state, society and economy (to put it simply), necessitates the identification of competing centres of power and an investigation into the formulation and facilitation of decisions, as well as the factors that influence their formulation and implementation.

In the United States and the majority of other immigrant societies, historical research on immigrant groups has boomed since the 1960s. The human rights and anti-racist movements provided crucial impetus for this new historical interest. Attention now focused on populations that had not previously been the focus of social research. The history of maids, textile workers, and the women's movement began to be studied on a much broader basis. The research on women as the overlooked half of occupational groups, classes, or protest movements was typically initiated at the methodological and conceptual level of the new social history. The triumphal march of social history was only halted by the dynamic emergence of cultural history in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Stellner et al., 2023).



As posited by Walter (2015) and Mergel (2002, p. 584), there remain numerous similarities between political history and the social political history: *"If you want to overstate the case and draw a parallel with contemporary political debates, then the lessons of earlier political history were to warn against the masses and rulelessness, while the social history of politics warned against insular backroom elites and called for a more historiographically courageous democracy, so to speak."* But both agreed that history teaches. *"It structures not only political but also social history narratives. Neither writes the history of everyday political life"*.

Cultural political history represents an interdisciplinary subfield that addresses the foundational elements that shape political action, the cultural and social prerequisites that underpin political action, and the institutional structures that facilitate political action. In this framework, there is a dominant attempt to cover all areas of politics, incorporating cultural and social historical research approaches. Consequently, political action is thus also interpreted as social action, and symbolic action is taken into account. Rather, the focus is on opening up different forms of ordering, the organization of people in societies, and the feedback on their individual and collective ways of thinking and being. Such histories draw on considerations of the everyday and histories of gender, discourse, and sexuality, and are concerned with communicative spaces and boundaries, exclusions and inclusions (Mergel, 2002; Landwehr, 2003).

Cultural political historians are unified by their distance from traditional political and social historians. According to Stollberg-Rilinger (2005), what unites them is less clear. The principal objective, however, is to deconstruct any over-historical, universalising and essentialist understanding of political forms of action and institutions, values and motives. They analyse, among other things, the culture of political celebration, forms of staging power, transformations of enemy images, normality as a central category of everyday life in the communist period, and the "thought world".

In addition to historical analysis, the field of political science encompasses the study of politics. The majority of contemporary political science can be classified as an empirical-analytical approach, which aims to describe, explain and analyse political reality without value distinctions. Politics is defined here primarily in terms of political action; political action, in turn, is defined as action aimed at the creation and implementation of generally binding rules and decisions (i.e., "generally binding") within and between groups of people. Thus, the concept of policy arenas has had a major impact on the literature on public policy and the political process. Both political science and sociology have recently focused on the political impact of 'social acceleration' and political culture (Vieira, 2011; Šima, 2014).

Today, the economic theoretical model of rational choice is quite influential in the study of politics (Becker, 1997; Buchanan, 2002). It is considered the best



interdisciplinary theoretical offering in the social sciences. The new rational actor is characterised by bounded rationality, that is to say, rationality that is subject to external constraints and seeks to maximise individual utility within these constraints. However, the specific appeal of the "economic" perspective extends beyond the examination of historical semantics and the rules governing what can be said based on the theory of action, as well as in institutional economic analysis, but also in other fields of application. One approach that has been discussed in historical research is property rights theory, which assumes that the nature of the relevant right to dispose of a resource under given institutional conditions affects the net benefits that an actor can derive from the relevant right to dispose of the resource. Related to this is the principal-agent approach, which addresses information asymmetry and explores interesting problems: cases where the agent (principal) has information (hidden information) or options (hidden action) that are not available to the principal (client). The rent-seeking approach should be mentioned here. The most influential and enduring approach, however, is arguably transactional economics, which can also be used as an umbrella term for the above approaches. It is based on the assumption that economic transactions are not free. The basic assumption of transaction cost economics is that economic development as a whole depends on institutional change, which refers back to institutional economics (Frings, 2007; Soběhart & Stellner, 2011).

Conclusion

In the present era, a considerable number of academic disciplines and their subfields are devoted to the analysis of political history. The fundamental issue appears to be the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration and communication between these fields (Vokoun & Stellner, 2015). Historians very often stick to their methods and procedures based on older conceptions of political history and do not use theoretical or methodological tools from other subfields or from political science, sociology, and economics in their analyses. On the book market today, one can find much sought-after analyses of "high politics" in narrative form, and especially biographies of political greats. At the same time, the new political history is converging with social political history. The history of parliamentarism, for example, can hardly do without analyses of social structures, while the history of political ideas borrows from the history of mentalities.

In a 2007 publication, Frings advocated for the development of an "integrated" political history that would emerge by combining the strengths of different approaches. It could become an integrative science. In particular, he argued for building a bridge between the new political history, political science, and political economy. This, however, would require scholars from each discipline to recognize that the other disciplines are not misguided or mistaken, but equal and worthy of the closest collaboration. It would also require the formation of interdisciplinary teams; in the case of political history, these teams would include political scientists, sociologists, economists, statisticians, lawyers,



and anthropologists in addition to historians. Similarly, disciplinary barriers would have to be overcome in journals indexed in Web of Science and other databases. Unfortunately, it is common for analyses combining, say, history and economics to be rejected by "historical" journals on the grounds that they belong in "economic" journals, and vice versa. Panel members of various funding agencies exhibit comparable behaviour. The emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach is nothing new in the social sciences and humanities, but the question is to what extent it has been possible to present policy analysis from the theoretical and methodological perspectives of multiple disciplines.

References

- Baker, P. (1999). The midlife crisis of the new political history. *The Journal of American History*, 86(1), 158–166. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567411>
- Becker, G. S. (1997). *Teorie preferencí*. Grada, Liberální institut.
- Buchanan, J. M. (2002). *Politika očima ekonoma*. Liberální institut.
- Cornelißen, Ch. (2000). Politische Geschichte. In Ch. Cornelißen (Ed.), *Geschichtswissenschaften: Eine Einführung* (s. 133–148).
- Craig, D. M. (2010). 'High politics' and the 'New political history'. *The Historical Journal*, 53(2), 453–475. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X10000129>
- Dülmen, R. van (2003). *Das Fischer-Lexikon: Geschichte* (2. vyd.). FISCHER Taschenbuch.
- Etzemüller, T. (2002). Sozialgeschichte als politische Geschichte: Die Etablierung der Sozialgeschichte in der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft. *Comparativ*, 12(1), 12–33.
- Etzemüller, T. (2001). *Sozialgeschichte als politische Geschichte: Werner Conze und die Neuorientierung Der westdeutschen Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945*. Oldenbourg Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783486595222>
- Frevert, U. (2005). *Neue Politikgeschichte: Perspektiven einer historischen Politikforschung*. Campus Verlag.
- Frings, A. (2007). Zwischen Ökonomie und Geschichte: Ein Plädoyer für den Dialog der Politikgeschichte mit der empirisch-analytischen Politikwissenschaft. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 32(4), 52–93. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.32.2007.4.52-93>
- Hillgruber, A. (1973). Politische Geschichte in moderner Sicht. *Historische Zeitschrift*, 216(3), 529–552. <https://doi.org/10.1524/hzhz.1973.216.jg.529>



- Hofmeyr, A. B. (2021). Foucault's Analyses of Neoliberal Governmentality: Past Investigations and Present Applications. *Etica & Politica*, 23(1), 589–616. <https://doi.org/20.500.12424/4036558>
- Kousser, J. M. (1976). The "New political history": A methodological critique. *Reviews in American History*, 4(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2701238>
- Landwehr, A. (2003). Diskurs – Macht – Wissen. *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 85(1), 71–117. <https://doi.org/10.7788/akg.2003.85.1.71>
- Lawrance, J. (2016). Politické dějiny. In S. Berger, H. Feldner, & K. Passmore (Eds.), *Jak se píšou dějiny: teorie a praxe* (s. 255–277). Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury.
- Marcowitz, R. (2006). Von der Diplomatiegeschichte zur Geschichte der internationalen Beziehungen: Methoden, Themen, Perspektiven einer historischen Teildisziplin. *Francia*, 32(3), 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.11588/fr.2005.3.45382>
- Martschukat, J. (2006). Feste Banden lose schnüren: „Gouvernementalität“ als analytische Perspektive auf Geschichte. *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, 3(2), 277–283. <https://doi.org/10.14765/zsf.dok-1961>
- Mergel, T. (2002). Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28(4), 574–606. <https://doi.org/10.14765/zsf.dok.2.556.v1>
- Pešek, J. (2006). (Západo)německé dějepisectví poválečné doby mezi tradicí státně politické historiografie a „modernitou“ sociální vědy. *Český časopis historický*, 104(3), 558–592.
- Řepa, M. (2009). Vědec a „muž činu“: Marc Bloch a jeho výjimečné postavení v kontinuitě vývoje moderního dějepisectví. In J. Hanuš, & R. Vlček (Eds.), *Historik v proměnách doby a prostředí 20. století* (s. 73–88). Matice moravská.
- Soběhart, R. (2009). Pojem "politična" v teorii Carla Schmitta: příspěvek k dějinám idejí Výmarské republiky. *Dvacáté století*, 1(1), 37–54.
- Soběhart, R., & Stellner, F. (2011). Budoucnost hospodářských dějin na českých vysokých školách. *Acta Oeconomica Pragensia*, 19(6), 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.18267/j.aop.350>
- Spengler, O. (2017). *Zánik Západu: Obrysy morfologie světových dějin* (2. vyd.). Academia.
- Stellner, F. a kol. (2023). *Úvod do studia historie*. Nakladatelství Karolinum.
- Stollberg-Rilinger, B. (2005). Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen? Einleitung. In B. Stollberg-Rilinger (Ed.), *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (č. 35, s. 9–24). Duncker & Humblot GmbH. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1q6bjx6.4>



Šima, K. (2014). Politická kultura. In J. Čechurová, & J. Randák (Eds.), *Základní problémy studia moderních a soudobých dějin* (s. 571–585). Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.

Thamer, H. U. (1990). Politische Geschichte, Geschichte der internationalen Beziehungen. In R. van Dülmen (Ed.), *Das Fischer Lexikon: Geschichte* (s. 52–65). FISCHER Taschenbuch.

Vieira, R. A. (2011). Connecting the new political history with recent theories of temporal acceleration: Speed, politics, and the cultural imagination of Fin de Siècle Britain. *History and Theory*, 50(3), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2303.2011.00591.x>

Vokoun, M., & Stellner, F. (2015). Czech economic historians and interdisciplinary approach. *Économies et Sociétés: Série "Histoire Économique Quantitative"*, 50(6), 857–875.

Walter, J. (2015). Kissing cousins?: Social history/Political history before and after the revisionist moment. *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 78(4), 703–722. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2015.0011>

Wehler, H. U. (1975). Moderne Politikgeschichte oder "Große Politik der Kabinette"? *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 1(2/3), 344–369.