Sink together, or swim together? Contemporary British political history and British politics

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In the latest issue of Twentieth Century British History, Charlotte Riley looks back at last year’s conference in Birmingham on ‘Rethinking Modern British Studies’ and hails it as evidence of the disciplinary vitality of modern British history. Noting the high number of papers submitted, the extension of the conference to cope with them, and the many stimulating and wide-ranging plenary lectures embodied within its programme, she argues that the vibrancy and preparedness of that conference to engage with big themes belied complaints (e.g. by Guldi and Armstrong in their ‘History manifesto’) of disciplinary stultification arising from the increasing narrowness of historical studies in terms of both topic and period. It’s hard to argue with Riley’s observation that the conference demonstrated the intellectual health of modern British history; yet perhaps some of its sub-disciplines are healthier than others?

In the previous issue of TCBH, for example, Kit Kowol observed that British political history as a discipline has languished in recent years. He noted that at the Birmingham conference an entire panel was devoted to ‘The political history blues’ - and no wonder, for political history (or at least ‘traditional’ British political history) was indeed surprisingly poorly represented at that conference – there being only one other panel devoted to it out of thirty two.

Tellingly, as Kowol also notes, that second panel was devoted to the neo-liberal revolution; for I think the study of the transition from postwar social democracy to neo-liberalism (or, to use a convenient shorthand, the ‘Thatcher revolution’) represents the exception that proves the rule that contemporary British political history is struggling.

It is hard to be specific about British political history’s decline as a sub-discipline of History. Generally, British history seems to be having less impact internationally. In relative terms, for example, the citation factor of the Journal of British Studies has declined from the 79th

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percentile of History journals to the 71st). Neither *Twentieth Century British History* nor *Contemporary British History* (the two journals that contemporary British political historians are most likely to publish in) is even listed by Thomson Reuters’ ‘In Cites’ journal citation reports.

Moreover, political history work submitted to each journal has to vie with submissions from a plethora of other sub-disciplines of history; and over time there seems to have been a diminution in political history’s share of each journal’s published articles. The lack of a journal devoted to British political history, or even to contemporary political history, is notable.

Nor, it has to be said, is British politics a beacon of thriving success in Political Science. Despite the creation of a new journal devoted to the topic in 2006 it has failed to make much of an impact. It is not yet, for example, indexed by the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences; and whilst the journal’s impact factor (presently at the 40th percentile of Political Science journals) is not that bad for a relatively new journal devoted to the politics of one country, it is hardly spectacular and, depressingly, it has actually declined over the latest 5 years for which we have data (from the 48th percentile).

Elsewhere amongst British political science journals the *British Journal of Political Science* remains highly ranked (90th percentile), but these days publishes little that is both specific to British politics and based on qualitative analysis. The *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* is ranked at the 82st percentile but, increasingly, seeks to emphasise in its publications the ‘international relations’ bit of its title.

In short, as academic disciplines neither contemporary British political history nor British politics seem at the moment to be as vibrant as one might wish them to be; and each appears to be on something of a downward trajectory, something that gives me great cause for concern.

What is political history?

What, though, do I mean when I speak of ‘contemporary British political history’? Or for that matter ‘contemporary’? The underlying logic of identifying ‘contemporary history’ as a particular object of study reaches back, of course, to Barraclough’s observation that it is defined by the way in which it affects the present (‘Contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape’). Although, as Peter Catterall pointed out, the definition of what is contemporary history then depends on the criteria we settle on for periodisation; and that periodisation is profoundly elastic;

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4 In Cites Journal Citation Reports [jcr.incites.thomsonreuters.com, accessed 20 May 2016].
5 Ibid
determined in fact by the nature of one’s focus on the present. Arbitrarily, therefore, but hardly without precedent, I interpret ‘contemporary history’ to begin in 1945 and to end, well, yesterday (though this is a very personal preference and I recognise that some will see that end date as stretching the definition of ‘history’ beyond breaking point).

But what do we mean when talk of ‘political history’? Though that would once have been an easy question to answer it has become much harder to do so. In 2002, Susan Pedersen, in her famous essay in David Cannadine’s edited book What is History Now, contrasted a traditional ‘high political history’ that had focused on institutions and elite actors with the ‘new political history’ that had emerged from the multiple revolutions represented by postmodernism, post-Marxism, and gender history and which had proved so disrupting to that more traditional ‘high political history’.

Post-modernism in particular had offered a very serious challenge to historians. The idea that history might be merely one discourse amongst many and the assertion that there can be so such thing as historical truth or objectivity plainly struck at the core of history as a discipline, at least as it had been traditionally practiced. As Beverley Southgate noted, historians ‘suffered a major theoretical challenge to the validity of their subject’ from postmodernism.

Contemporary political historians met that challenge by seeking at once to integrate some of the insights of the post-modernist critique whilst generally rejecting its implication that history can only ever be, as Peter Catterall put it, ‘a fictionalised interpretation based on a refined past’. That, however, and here I am channelling Arthur Marwick, put a high premium on maintaining the greatest possible scholarly rigour in the identification and extraction of evidence, and in its analysis and interpretation (bearing in mind the political purposes underlying many of our primary and secondary sources).

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12 The focus can be seen in the attack on Correlli Barnett by several contemporary historians, with Barnett accused of a lapse of scholarly rigour and the production of a politically inspired narrative of decline in postwar Britain (see Peter Catterall, ‘Contemporary British History: A Personal View’, Contemporary British History, 16 (2002); Jim Tomlinson, ‘Correlli Barnett’s History: The Case of Marshall Aid’, Twentieth Century British History, 8 (1997), 222-38. ‘History is NOT literature’ wailed Marwick, for whom rigorous engagement with the historical secondary literature and, particularly, with primary sources within a clear analytical framework was the last line of defence against what he saw as the unacceptable relativism of the post-modern cultural turn in
This tension between different historical approaches within political history could be viewed negatively but Pedersen took a positive view of the collision between ‘left-leaning students of popular politics’ and ‘right-leaning “high political” historians’, (Though I took great issue with that latter political designation – which seemed to me to be simplistic and, in a British context, frankly little more than an observation that the history of its modern politics was for much of the time a history of Conservative success at winning elections in what has been dubbed the ‘Conservative Century’).13

Pedersen argued that the creative tension arising between a left/low and a right/high politics, had produced a British political history that was at once ‘flourishing and increasingly consensual’.14 She had a point. There was indeed a flowering of new political history that, in its focus on political cultures at the grassroots, sought successfully to enrich our understanding of the British political system.15

This move to a ‘new political history’ at the turn of the century came after two decades in which an important, if somewhat desultory, debate had been taking place amongst contemporary historians about what exactly the purpose of contemporary history was, and about whether it was going in the right direction. Common to many of the contributions made to this debate was the question of whether contemporary political history might have become too compartmentalised.16

For some this was a debate about whether there has been too great a divide between the political and the social, and about whether contemporary political history needed to break out of a perceived focus on high politics and grand narratives such as post-war economic growth and modernisation, Britain’s relative economic decline, the decline of empire, the breakdown of a putative post-war ‘consensus’, the rise of the welfare state, and so on.17

In this analysis, the prescription for enriching contemporary political history was for contemporary political historians to engage with other disciplines such as sociology, women’s studies or cultural studies. As Brian Brivati wrote, ‘the real challenge to the contemporary historian is to train the skill and style of communication and the richness of

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14 Ibid, p. 45.
17 Conekin, Mort, and Waters, p.???
approaches that have been developed [in contemporary history] onto some of the theoretical problems that advances in other fields are putting forward’. In other words, it was suggested that contemporary historians should be using their skills to analyse the recent past using the theoretical propositions of scholars in other disciplines, to frame that analysis.

Undoubtedly, the ‘cultural turn’ in history produced a fertile research agenda for contemporary political historians. Yet I want to suggest that it also suffered from some shortcomings, the most obvious of which was, I want to argue, somewhat controversially I suspect in the beating heart of cultural studies in Britain, precisely the thirst for a political history written ‘from below’.

I want to emphasise that this is not to decry such an approach; it is, rather, to question the increasing dominance of cultural and social political histories and the squeezing out of a more traditional mode of analysis focused on political institutions and ‘elite’ actors. For there seem to me to be several resulting problems.

Let me illustrate that by looking at one topic: the 1984-5 miners’ strike. A search of the Bibliography of British and Irish History reveals that in the five years between 2010 and 2014 there were 21 works published on this topic but only two of these consider the strike in the context of its national political importance. I think this is imbalanced; and I think that imbalance matters for three reasons.

First, whilst local studies or studies focusing on the strike from a social or cultural perspective (which dominate in this selection of works) serve to enrich our understanding to a degree there is a clear danger of too much focus on trees and not enough on the wood within which they stand. The miners’ strike of 1984-5 marked a key moment not just in the destruction of British mining communities and of mining as an industry in the UK but in the annihilation of the unions as both an industrial and a political force. This was a matter of national political significance; it was an important moment in the ideological battle between Keynesian social democracy and neo-liberalism; it created huge tensions within government; and it divided both the Labour party and the TUC. Yet the detailed political mechanics of those events are very far from explored. Despite the opportunity to use oral history to explore those events from an institutional perspective this was not happening to any great degree. Moreover although many of the relevant records of central government and of unions and the Labour party were open by 2014, little use was being made of them. This is a failure that needs urgently to be addressed or we will continue to have a profoundly fragmented picture of the strike and an inadequate understanding of how it played out at the national level, and of its national political significance.

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Second, the dominant focus on the experience and legacy of resistance to the government’s mine closure programme, interesting as it is, gives only part of the story. Plainly, there are broader perspectives – that of Conservatives is the rather obvious one, though one unlikely to be captured by social and cultural studies that focus on those who participated in and otherwise actively supported the strike. There is also, of course, a history of these events to be explored from the perspective of those on the left who were less enamoured of the NUM’s attempt to use industrial muscle to challenge the power of a democratically elected government. Again, I pass no judgement on the respective validity of different perspectives; but I do think that we need a broader and, crucially, top-down, view if we are to obtain a full understanding of the strike’s political importance.

Finally, there is a paradox, surely, in the fact that British political history seems to have become increasingly focused on exploring postwar politics ‘from below’ even as British politics became increasingly centralised. This is an era that saw a marked diminution in the powers of local government and the growing reach of the state (or, post-Thatcher, what one might term the ‘quasi-state’ of privatised but highly regulated former state industries, quasi-autonomous-non-governmental bodies, semi-autonomous but politically controlled civil service ‘agencies’ and private companies operating under contract to deliver public services). It is an era with an increasing volume of parliamentary legislation and executive orders. It is an era characterised by the growing focus on prime ministerial power (at least up until 2010). It is an era in which some elements of centralised power were devolved, but remained centralised in the UK’s several elements. And, of course, from the late-1980s it’s an era in which the EU became increasingly important in domestic British politics.

So, when we come to write the history of the past week we are going to have essentially to fill in many of those gaps, because they haven’t yet received enough attention.

In that context, I would argue, we would benefit from a rebalancing of contemporary political history back towards a focus on political elites and on national political and governmental institutions and their relationship to other organisations and to individuals. An increasingly centralised polity, increasingly distant from the people it served, surely deserves and demands scholarship that engages with that shift in institutional power and political culture.

This is not to assume that there is a zero-sum trade-off between a ‘new political history’ from below and a traditional ‘high’ political history. Rather it is to seek a path that combines the two and moves beyond these labels, whilst also allowing the construction of more histories that give a national and institutional perspective that recognises the complex interplay between different societal and political forces in the making of modern British politics. 20

Like David Craig, I remain sceptical about Pedersen’s claim that this convergence of the ‘new political history’ and a more traditional ‘high politics’ approach was already under way in

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2002, and I am also sceptical that there has been any subsequent development of such convergence, at least to any significant degree.

Re-engaging with politics

If contemporary British political history might profit from a reorientation back toward the national, toward political institutions, and toward actors in political elites, might it also benefit from a better engagement with scholars in Political Science?

I think it could. In fact, one of the rather surprising features of contemporary political history (and, ironically, of recent studies of British politics by political scientists), has been its relative lack of interest in Political Science theory, particularly in its so-called ‘institutional turn’; a development which has seen that discipline attempt to engage seriously with the role of history in shaping the development of political institutions. \(^\text{21}\) The fact that a new sub-discipline of political science dubbed ‘historical institutionalism’ has emerged over the past two decades seems almost entirely to have passed contemporary political historians by. I think this is both extraordinary and a great shame.

Indeed, it seems to me that a new agenda of engagement between political science and political history is overdue. I believe that such an engagement could (in fact would) have considerable benefits for each discipline whilst at the same time considerably enriching our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary politics.

One reason why an engagement with historical institutionalism might be useful is because, it has to be said, it is hard for the historian not find fault with much its historical analysis. It is notable, for example, that, whilst historical institutionalism has seen political scientists seeking actively to engage with history, they have sometimes done so in ways that do not acknowledge the complexity of the events they describe because they engaged too little with primary sources.

Let me give one example of this failure that relates to my own interests in the history of British pensions policy. Paul Pierson’s work on institutional path dependence sought to argue, with reason, that because the commitment to pay (and perhaps to fund) a pension is necessarily a very long-term commitment the making of pension policy by government has

to acknowledge past decision-making.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, whilst policy makers may sometimes (in fact often do) claim they are ‘revolutionising’ the provision of pensions in the UK, there is actually no such thing as a ‘blank sheet’ in pensions policy because past commitments constrain present political options.

In operationalising that insight at the turn of the century Pierson used the Thatcher government’s failure to abolish the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme as an exemplar of path dependence in action – citing that government’s bowing to spirited opposition in 1984 from an ad hoc alliance of the Labour Party, trades unions, a “poverty lobby” worried about the position of women and the low paid’, and employers and occupational pension schemes.\textsuperscript{23} That analysis was based on Pierson’s reading of newspapers and official publications, and of the social science literature. It was fine, so far as it went, but the reality is that recently released government papers make clear that Pierson’s reading of events was incomplete.

First, he very significantly underestimated the scale of the Conservatives’ ambitions on pensions – their intention was to sweep away not just SERPS but also the system of private occupational pensions provision that by then covered half the workforce (in other words they sought to dismantle the entire architecture of pension provision in Britain over and above the very minimal basic state pension instituted in 1948).

Second, Pierson also underestimated the scale and complexity of the opposition to the government’s reform proposals and, crucially, the role of the financial services industry in causing a rapid u-turn by Thatcher once she became aware of the scale of opposition amongst actors that the Conservatives had assumed would be supportive.

In short, Pierson’s history of the Thatcher u-turn on SERPS is incomplete. Contemporary political history based on a full and disciplined reading of the primary record confirms Pierson’s broad thesis but provides a much more detailed perspective that both emphasises the scale of neo-liberal ambitions and the key role played by financial interests in the policy reversal. So we have here an example of how political history can be used to test political science theory and in the process validate, invalidate or (as in this case) help refine it.

Or let us take another example, Peter Hall’s 1993 analysis of Britain’s abandonment of a Keynesian policy-making framework in the late-1970s (this being one of the earliest and most influential works in political science’s ‘ideational turn’).\textsuperscript{24} This was a seminal article that sought to explain the most significant change in postwar British political economy as a product of technocratic ‘social learning’, drawing on Kuhn’s conception of paradigmatic change in science in its elaboration of three orders of change (in ascending order, changes


\textsuperscript{24} Peter A. Hall, ‘Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policy Making in Britain’, Comparative Politics, 25 (1993). At the time of writing Google Scholar lists 5213 citations of this work.
to policy instrument settings, instruments, and goals), with 3rd order change seen as representing the replacement of one economic policy paradigm by another.

Like many others I was profoundly influenced by Hall’s insight for I found his Kuhnian distinction between everyday policy-making as ‘normal science’ and the much more significant reorientation of policy goals embodied in a policy paradigm shift (i.e. in a shift in what might be thought of as the economic policy gestalt within which both parties had come to operate by the mid-1970s) to be helpful in conceptualising the ‘Thatcher revolution’.

Yet, as a trained historian I could also see that Hall’s conceptualisation of that process, whilst illuminating, was too simplistic. As I noted in an article with Michael Oliver a decade ago, a close reading of the primary record (at that point done without reference to government and particularly Treasury papers, the latter amazingly not yet being open for the period beyond 1979, but with access to both a wide range of published primary material and oral history) revealed a much more complex picture.25

For a start the transition by government from one paradigm to another began earlier than the 1979 general election (which Hall had identified as the defining moment in which the political battle between alternative Keynesian and monetarist economic policy frameworks was decided), with Healey’s Treasury forced to embrace some key elements of the ‘monetarist’ agenda such as money supply targetting.

Moreover, as Mike Oliver and I argued, the process of change was both a highly contingent and a drawn out affair that went well beyond the Conservatives’ initial adoption of ‘monetarism’ as their new policy framework; evolving over time into something that we would now identify as ‘neo-liberal’.

I did not, and do not, question the utility of Hall’s theorising but, again, I hope this example shows that a constructive dialogue between political scientists and historians can be fruitful for both disciplines and, in the process, help us both to refine theory and better understand the processes of institutional change (and continuity) that structure modern politics.

Such a dialogue could benefit Political Science because historical methods fit reasonably neatly with an established strand of qualitative analysis in that disciple. The sort of richly empirical case study that historians can provide (and political historians are surely in the business of writing such studies) can, as Charles Ragin put it, link ‘the equivocal nature of the theoretical realm and the complexity of the empirical realm’.26

In particular, the sheer quantity of information embodied in a typical historical case study is consonant with King, Keohane and Verba’s observation that detailed empirical case studies

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allows a greater quantity of theoretical hypotheses about political phenomena to be tested than is possible in much quantitative analysis.\textsuperscript{27} 

More than this, however, I believe, that there would also be significant benefits to contemporary political history. These lie in two dimensions:

1. the bigger scale of analysis (with political scientists being concerned more with causal patterns across cases than historians with their tendency to focus on a particular case); and
2. greater analytical rigour.

Let us start with the benefits of scale, but also continue briefly our discussion of paradigmatic change in the neo-liberal revolution in British economic policy making. For me, one of the most tedious debates in contemporary British history is whether there was or was not a postwar ‘consensus’. I have placed that term in inverted commas because, of course, it is now impossible not to do so. The assault on the concept began in the late-1980s with Ben Pimlott’s characterisation of consensus as a ‘myth’.\textsuperscript{28} Thereafter, a succession of contemporary historians questioned the existence of such an agreement between major political parties in the UK.\textsuperscript{29}

That attack was based, fundamentally, on a reading of primary sources that revealed not just ideological and policy differences between but within the major political parties in Britain. Yet the debate over the existence or otherwise of a postwar consensus was, in truth, a somewhat sterile one for nobody had ever claimed (except in a tongue-in-cheek way along the lines of the \textit{Economist}’s famous identification of ‘Butskellism’) that the Conservative and Labour parties thought and acted alike in the postwar period.\textsuperscript{30} To claim otherwise was to set up a straw man ripe for, I submit, somewhat trite incineration. Rather the claim about ‘consensus’ was that the gap between the policies of the two parties narrowed in the decades immediately after the Second World War, even as their ideological aims remained different. As Kevin Hickson has rightly noted, this was a consensus over (selected) policy means not ideological ends.\textsuperscript{31} Thus both parties might embrace, for example, the utility of the welfare state but for different reasons: Labour for reasons of equality; the Conservatives because they had come to the conclusion that a healthier population would promote faster economic growth. Likewise both parties could embrace a Keynesian economic policy framework even as they disagreed about the precise economic role of the state, the most


\textsuperscript{29} For a good summary of key works see Duncan Fraser, ‘The Postwar Consensus: A Debate Not Long Enough?’, \textit{Parliamentary Affairs}, 53 (2000).

\textsuperscript{30} Anon, ‘Mr Butskell’s Dilemma’, \textit{The Economist}, 5764 (1954).

effective shape and level of taxation, or the specific contours of capitalism that might be most desirable.

The problem with the ‘consensus debate’ is that the identification of a myriad ways in which the major political parties disagreed was conducted at the micro level by focusing on particular instances of difference. As consensus morphed into ‘consensus’, however we began to lose sight of a macro-truth about the nature of politics in postwar Britain, a view of British politics that political scientists often kept in view precisely because they tended to operate at the macro level.

The fact is that the consensus concept did tell us something about postwar politics. Indeed to deny the existence of such a consensus made it extremely difficult to understand what happened in British politics from the early- to mid-1970s as the Left began to redraw Labour’s economic policy and the new Right began first to reorientate the Conservative party towards neo-liberalism and then to take the country on a very different and politically incendiary economic and political journey, in the process transforming the Labour party as it sought to adjust to changed political conditions.

Indeed, as David Dutton noted, in the light of this it was hard not to characterise the trajectory of postwar British political history as the rise, fall and reinvention of ‘consensus’.

Dutton, however, was one of the relatively few historians who stuck with the concept. More commonly, it was kept alive by those working in Politics departments in British universities and those (including some historians) writing in politics journals.

It is with some relief, therefore, that one sees that the keeping of that flame alive has allowed its recent reappearance in the work of some contemporary political historians. Richard Toye, for example, implicitly accepts the concept in this argument that political actors could themselves orientate themselves for or against the notion of consensus; or Dean Blackburn’s identification of disputes about distributive questions between ‘middle way’ Conservatives and ‘revisionist’ social democrats against a background of common epistemological assumptions.

What, then of my second potential benefit to contemporary political history of a better engagement with political science: greater analytical rigour (and here I write as a

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contemporary historian trained in a political science department). My sense is that historians in general tend to focus more on explaining what happened than on explaining why it happened; being too focused on primary source analysis and too little focused on setting out clearly the explicit frameworks within which those sources are being analysed. (The same is true, ironically, of much recent writing on British politics by political scientists).

One of the things I would praise about political science is that, though its pretension to scientific rigour is generally overstated, at its best it does seek not just to construct theories to explain political phenomena but, as Stinchcombe put it in 1964, to state clearly both its ‘theories and the observational statements about how the causal forces involved are manifested in the real world.’ More than that, however, political science methods involve (or, more correctly should involve) testing these theoretical statements with via techniques such as controlled comparison, congruence analysis, and process tracing. As Bennett and George observed, the latter is where ‘researchers in history and political science have more in common with one another than they do with some schools of thought within their own disciplines.’ As Bennett and George also observed, whilst most historical studies do have an explanatory purpose they tend to draw implicitly rather than explicitly upon explanatory theories in constructing their explanations. That seems to me to be a fair criticism, for most historians do avoid setting out the theoretical frameworks that structure their detailed analysis of historical events.

Thus, whilst historians can potentially enrich political science by bringing their expertise in ‘process tracing’ to bear on testing that discipline’s causal explanations of political phenomena, so contemporary political history can be enriched by a more explicit acknowledgement of the analytical frameworks deployed in constructing historical explanations. The result could potentially be not just better theorising in political science but a more disciplined and insightful assessment of evidence by historians in the context of analytical frameworks that seek to explain causal mechanisms.

**Conclusion**

This paper began with the rather bleak observation that both contemporary British political history and the study of British politics in political science presently seem to be in far from robust health. I have argued that the former would indeed benefit from breaking out of the boundaries that contain it.

We have, of course, been here before: ‘breaking boundaries’ surely defines the ‘cultural turn’. That disciplinary reorientation served to enrich our understanding of British politics by reminding us that politics, and particularly democratic politics, had always embraced actors

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38 Ibid. p. 146.
well-beyond the elites and the institutions with which political history had traditionally been concerned.

I have argued, however, that as a consequence of the cultural turn’s spectacular success we sacrificed something important:

- We lost sight of the enduring (and indeed increasing) importance of elite political actors and of political institutions in British politics;
- We began to lose sight of the ‘big picture’ as we failed to join up small-scale studies in a way that allowed us to say something more encompassing; and that
- We failed sufficiently to confront the post-modern challenge by increasing sufficiently the level of scholarly rigour in our discipline to allow us to make objective claims about the political world we study.

Despite my somewhat gloomy analysis, however, I remain optimistic. At some point, I am convinced, we are going to accept that the most natural interdisciplinary bedfellows for contemporary political historians are political scientists. The ‘Breaking Boundaries’ conference at Birmingham suggests there is a desire amongst contemporary political historians for this. I hope that the formation of a ‘Politics and History’ specialist group by the Political Science association might herald a similar interest amongst some political scientists.39

There is, I think, much to gain from such a reengagement (I say ‘reengagement’ because before the cultural turn it was hard to slip a proverbial cigarette paper between the two, and indeed many scholars embodied the two disciplines in one person). As historians, I believe we would benefit from the more explicit theorising that characterises political science, because it would focus us both more clearly and more effectively on causal explanations. It would also serve to rebalance contemporary political history towards the macro and away from small-scale studies that, however interesting they are in themselves, are inevitably limited when it comes to telling a bigger and, I would argue, more insightful, and (dare I say it) important story.

At the same time we could enrich the study of British politics by political scientists by bringing to bear our skills as historians at analysing and interpreting large volumes of empirical data in case studies that test, and in the process validate, invalidate, or refine, explanatory theories of how politics in general, and British politics in particular, actually worked in the past and works today.

In truth, I think the boundary between us is quite thin, that in practice many if not most contemporary historians already cross it, and that the only real requirement is to do so in a more methodical and deliberate way. The easiest way to do that is, perhaps, for contemporary historians not just to engage seriously with the political science literature but to bring political scientists into the equation in collaborative work that produces the constructive engagement between the two disciplines that is presently all too absent.

39 http://politics-history.org.uk/
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Anon, 'Mr Butskell's Dilemma', The Economist, 13 February 1954, p. 3.
Pete Dorey, "'It Was Just Like Arming to Face the Threat of Hitler in the Late 1930s."


