

**Book Review: 'Harvard's Quixotic
Pursuit of a New Science' by
Patrick L. Schmidt**

Karen L. Field

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Editor's note: This newest addition to HAR Reviews pairs a review essay with a brief author Q&A. Our reviewer, Karen Field, drafted the essay first and then brought some questions to the author. We thank Karen for suggesting this format and Patrick Schmidt for his participation, and we welcome more experiments with HoA writing and conversation.

Patrick L. Schmidt

Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science: The Rise and Fall of the Department of Social Relations

Rowman and Littlefield, 2022

264 pages, notes, bibliography, index

Maya Angelou once said, “you can’t really know where you’re going until you know where you’ve been.” If she was right, then everyone with a stake in the social sciences today should read and reflect upon *Harvard's Quixotic Pursuit of a New Science*, a new work by Patrick L. Schmidt that traces the rise and fall of Harvard University’s Department of Social Relations, a department whose founders strove to unite sociology, anthropology, and psychology into a single discipline dedicated to the understanding of human behavior.

By the late 1970s, when Schmidt was an undergraduate at Harvard looking for a topic for his undergraduate honors thesis, the Department had all but disappeared from campus. Its library was its last vestige, and it was there that Schmidt was completing a three year work-study job. His time at the library sparked an interest in knowing how the Department had come to be and why it had declined, and made him “feel a deep, personal commitment to [the] topic” (Schmidt 2022, xiii). Since a number of the faculty members who had been active in the Department were still alive, he was able to interview them, providing extensive data for his 1978 thesis, “Towards a History of the Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, 1946–1972.” Upon its completion, one of those faculty, sociologist David Riesman, wrote him a congratulatory letter praising the work and urging him to publish it. Schmidt was flattered, but at the time, he says, he “had no time or appetite for further scholarly pursuits” (xii).

Fast forward to 2009: Schmidt, now an attorney specializing in Latin American and Caribbean affairs, is going through a box of old papers and discovers Riesman’s letter. Then and there, he feels inspired to revise and refine the thesis and share it with a wider audience. For that, the academic world can be grateful, as the resulting work has much to teach us about how our fields of knowledge are shaped by politics and other forces on academic campuses and in the world beyond.

First among the global developments he credits with sparking the idea of an interdisciplinary field is the emergence, initially from Europe, of psychoanalysis. The dynamic new theories of human behavior promoted by Freud and Jung intrigued four Harvard faculty members, Talcott Parsons (Sociology), Clyde Kluckhohn (Anthropology), and Gordon Allport and Henry Murray (both Psychology). However, their respective de-

partments were less enthusiastic about the new ideas than they were. Sociologists and psychologists felt that psychoanalytic theory did not lend itself well to laboratory testing or to statistical analysis and was therefore not truly scientific, while anthropologists questioned whether theories culled from the psychodynamics of Western nuclear families could be extrapolated to other societies. No doubt some scholars were also uncomfortable with the high importance placed on sex and sexuality in the Freudian canon. It occurred to those four that they might join together to forge a new field, open to psychoanalytic concepts, that would analyze human behavior on every “level”—biological, cultural, and individual—hence their nickname for themselves, “The Levellers.”

Their early efforts to create such a collaboration were soon accelerated by what Schmidt identifies as the second global development to shape the Department: the entry of the United States into World War II. Suddenly, new conditions called for new attention to, and funding for, areas of study that would allow Allied leaders to understand and anticipate the actions of their enemies, the Germans and Japanese, and also those of their own troops under the conditions of modern combat. Anthropology was the first host of such efforts, under the rubric of “Culture and Personality,” a field that would focus on the way different cultures shape the individual’s patterns of cognition and affect. Sociologists and psychologists were also enlisted in the effort, and such teamwork convinced the Levellers that their interdisciplinary dream could become a reality.

Finally, on January 29, 1946, the Harvard administration formally recognized the Department of Social Relations, and it soon attracted generous funding from the Carnegie Corporation as well as numerous federal agencies like the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Mental Health. Its introductory course soon became the most popular class on the Harvard campus, especially among returning veterans—a phenomenon which Schmidt suggests was prompted by their desire to understand the harrowing events they had so recently witnessed and survived.

Fast forward to May 16, 1972: after just twenty-six years, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard votes to subsume the Department of Social Relations under the Department of Psychology, a move which effectively ends the Levellers’ dream. Schmidt’s account of the events that led to its demise is so propulsive that it almost takes on the air of a detective novel: we know “who” was killed, but not “how” and “why.”

His analysis of the “how” and “why” occupies the second half of the work. Schmidt concludes that the primary reason for the collapse of Social Relations as a viable entity was the fact that it “had no theoretical foundation uniting its disciplines” (161), probably resulting from the failure of its faculty to engage together in truly interdisciplinary research and publication. While individual scholars in all of the relevant fields had at least some acquaintance with psychoanalysis, it was not the preferred paradigm of them all. Thus, though each of the Levellers produced copious scholarship, they rarely designed, executed, and publicly shared projects together. Had they done so, and had the results been impressive, Schmidt implies, the theoretical framework they used might well have caught on with other scholars and been acknowledged as an epis-

temological breakthrough. But they did not. We may never know the reason for their hesitancy. In Schmidt's view, it was most likely "the strength of [their] ties, emotional and professional, to [their] original disciplines" (162), ties which were passed along to graduate students who felt their careers would be safer if they identified with a traditional field rather than as alumni of an experimental unit like "Soc-Rel," as they called it. He notes, in a thoughtful concluding chapter, that even though the Department died, it "drew distinguished faculty and produced accomplished graduates" (171), through whom "the spirit of Social Relations lives on" (173) in occasional new efforts to break down the separate "silos" of academia (see, e.g., Gardner 2022).

All in all, Schmidt's work stands as an important contribution to the history of the social sciences that will be of compelling interest to all who seek to understand how the human quest for knowledge evolves over time. To his credit, his account is blessedly free of academic jargon, and therefore accessible to readers from varied backgrounds. Direct quotes from some of the major players in the account, like David Riesman and George Homans, give welcome immediacy to the historical account.

As I read his final summary, I could not help wishing he had been just a bit more adventurous in evaluating the significance of the "rise and fall" of "Soc-Rel." Could it be that the attachment shown by faculty and graduate students to traditional disciplines reflected the need of humans in modern industrial societies for a sense of belonging, one which was once found in tribe or faith but which is now more often found in the workplace? And that when these grow too "big" or "broad," they simply fail to satisfy that need to belong? If so, then current attempts to design new meta-paradigms integrating theories of climate science and human behavior (see, e.g., Homer-Dixon and Rockstrom 2022) may be doomed to failure unless they learn from the experience of the Levellers. I hope Schmidt may one day choose to pursue that line of thought.

I also found myself wondering why the rise of cultural materialism, stemming from Marx and Engels, traced compellingly through Julian Steward (1955) and Leslie White (1949) by Marvin Harris (1968) and echoed by similar ideas in the sociology of the day (see, e.g., Mills 1959) failed to engage and inspire the Levellers in their quest for a unified theory of human behavior, since in my view—admittedly biased toward anthropology—it comes closer to achieving that goal than any other. Yet none of those thinkers seem to have been involved in the "Soc-Rel" movement. Were they not invited to join, and if not, why not? Were the Levellers opposed to materialist explanations of human behavior? Could it have been out of a fear of McCarthyites, rampant at the time and quick to stigmatize materialist notions as "un-American?" Or were some materialists invited to join but declined, perhaps due to institutional loyalty? I would welcome a future work by Schmidt exploring that very question.

Certainly, like other aspects of culture, that which we gloss as "knowledge" continues to change in response to the needs of those who pursue it as well as to events in the world around them. Scholars who dream of affecting the course of that change must learn from the experience of those who have gone before them. And we must hope

that thoughtful scholars like Patrick Schmidt stand ready to chronicle and analyze their efforts as compellingly as he has done for the work of the Levellers here.

Author Q&A

KLF: There are probably many scholars who, like you, have papers, projects, or theses in their pasts which still interest them, but which they have never published. Suppose that, inspired by your example, they would like to go back and revise, update, and expand a past work of their own. What advice could you give them?

PLS: I would encourage scholars to revisit their earlier unpublished works if they continue to have an interest in the underlying subject matter. First, new information may have become available. In my case, I benefitted from correspondence of the relevant faculty members of Social Relations that had become available since their deaths. Some of them had also written memoirs that discussed their experiences in the department. Second, revisiting past work with perhaps not new eyes, but refreshed or more mature eyes, can add a new dimension or perspective to updating or expanding a previous work. That was true in my case. Certain connections leapt out to me upon a second review that I had missed the first time around.

KLF: Many of the scholars you mention in your book have passed away. If, in preparing it, you could have magically gone back in time and interviewed some of them, who would you most have wished to meet with?

PLS: This is a great question. I was fortunate as an undergraduate to have interviewed many of the scholars mentioned in my book: the legendary Talcott Parsons as well as Henry Murray, B. F. Skinner, David McClelland, and David Riesman, among others. I was unable, however, to interview the cultural anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, who was one of the founders of the Department of Social Relations. He had died many years earlier. It would be fascinating to get his perspective on the formation and structure of the department, the development of the “Culture and Personality School” (that married, for a time, clinical psychology and cultural anthropology), the influence of psychoanalytic thought on anthropology, the anthropological approach of the Russian Research Center that he directed, his dissatisfaction with the Department by 1960, and other issues.

KLF: As you look at the social sciences today, do you see signs that the Levellers have left a discernible legacy? Why or why not?

PLS: The legacy of the Levellers on today’s social sciences is barely discernible. They failed to create a new interdisciplinary science. There is no discipline, or even a “school” of Social Relations, although they did important work in the traditional fields comprising the constituent disciplines of the department. It just wasn’t particularly interdisciplinary in nature. They did, however, train three generations of graduate students in an interdisciplinary atmosphere. Some of these PhDs incorporated this approach or ethos in their own research and became renowned scholars. In that sense,

the Levellers left an impact. I give the example of Howard Gardner, a highly regarded professor of developmental psychology at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who credits his interdisciplinary style to the mentorship of David Riesman, Erik Erikson, and Jerome Bruner. Presumably, Gardner's students, in turn, absorb some of their ethos as well.

KLF: Is there anything else you'd like to share with readers of this review?

PLS: The only other thing that comes to mind is the challenge I faced in writing a book that treats the relevant academic theories and debates with a rigor that would satisfy scholars and specialists, yet appeal to a general well-read audience. I treated it as a scholarly monograph first and foremost (sixty pages of Notes and Bibliography and another ten pages of Index), but I tried to write as vividly as possible about the personalities and controversies. Whether I succeeded is yet to be determined, but I gave it my best effort.

KLF: Thank you for that!

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2 Comments

Janet Steins

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For those interested in reading more on this topic, I suggest Rebecca Lemov's UC Berkeley 2000 anthropology dissertation, "The Laboratory Imagination: Experiments in Human and Social Engineering, 1929–1956." Her study covers both Harvard's Department of Social Relations and Yale's Institute of Human Relations. Rebecca teaches in Harvard's Department of the History of Science today and also is also on HAR's Advisory Board.

Peter Schröder

July 16, 2023

An excellent review which stimulates to read Schmidt's book. There are so many fascinating chapters and episodes in the histories of anthropology, often forgotten or even silenced not because their protagonists were representatives of discriminated minorities, but because of other reasons which need to be explained. I think that Schmidt did a great job in deciding to review and publish his thesis.

The Ted K Archive

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Author affiliation: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Washburn
University.

“Some faculty became notorious for their questionable research: Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (reborn as Ram Dass) gave the psychedelic drug psilocybin to students, while Henry Murray traumatized undergraduate Theodore Kaczynski (later the Unabomber) in a three-year-long experiment. Central to the story is the obsessive quest of legendary sociologist Talcott Parsons for a single theory unifying the social sciences– the white whale to his Captain Ahab. All in all, Schmidt’s lively narrative is an instructive tale of academic infighting, hubris, and scandal.”

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