

Specializing in Interdisciplinarity
The Committee on Social Thought as Chicago's Antidote to
Specialization in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

The social sciences at the University of Chicago are renowned for their leadership in the development of empirical investigation in their respective disciplines. The post-war Chicago School of economics is only the best known of the efforts at the University to entrench specialized competencies in the faculty and students practicing a social scientific discipline. During the same period, the Committee on Social Thought emerged as an academic interdisciplinary unit in the humanities and social sciences. Ironically, the Committee became the place in which one could practice and learn the specialized competencies required by interdisciplinary work.

In a review of Donald Levine's history of sociology, Edward Tiryakian (1996) made a passing remark about the absence of any discussion in contemporary histories of sociology of the attempts to bridge the fragmenting social sciences in post-war American universities by the provision of alternative approaches, especially those which were interdisciplinary. The focus on individuals, national traditions, or schools of thought has so dominated the history of sociology, Tiryakian argued, that the success and failure of these alternative approaches have been ignored. Among the institutions pursuing alternative, interdisciplinary approaches that he mentioned was the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.

Much the same could be said about the absence of the approaches which attempted to bridge the fragmentation of the social sciences from the historiography of economics. Indeed, in the histories of post-war economics, not only are interdisciplinary approaches largely ignored, but the movement of economics itself into the realm usually occupied by other social sciences has become a significant theme. Economic imperialism (Lazear 2000) implies that the

interdisciplinary approaches developed in places like the Committee on Social Thought hardly deserve the title of social science at all.

However, several of the 20th century's leading economists – F.A. Hayek, Frank H. Knight, and Robert Fogel – were members of the Committee, and the Committee became the home of other scholars and students who might have been welcomed into the economics department in earlier decades. But the Committee did not flourish because it provided a home to the homeless – those who no longer fit in the specialized social scientific disciplines. Instead, the Committee flourished because it focused on a particular kind of interdisciplinarity, for which it identified specific competencies which it could hone in a disciplined manner. In a world of specialized social sciences, the Committee became the place one went to become a *specialist in interdisciplinarity*. Ironically, then, the Committee's devotion to interdisciplinarity reinforced the development of disciplinary competencies in the post-war period. Thus, telling the story of the Committee and its relation to economics and the other social sciences at the University of Chicago will expand our knowledge of both how Chicago economics was able to focus its attention on specific “disciplinary competences” (Emmett 1998) and how the Committee developed a disciplined approach to honing the competencies for interdisciplinary inquiry. This paper is an initial attempt to tell that story.

Table Settings: Social Science in Hutchins's University and the Birth of the Committee on Social Thought

The Committee on Social Thought was born in the early 1940s, when Robert Hutchins was President of the University, when America had just entered a war which Hutchins (and many others) thought would shake the foundations of Western liberal democracy, and the social sciences at Chicago and elsewhere were in transition. Thus, we begin by examining the state of Chicago's social science departments in the early 1940s and President Hutchins' activities leading up to the creation of the Committee.

When one spoke of “the Chicago School” in the 1940s, it was the Chicago School of Sociology of which one spoke. Although the School's heyday had been in the period between 1920 and 1935, the tradition of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess lingered, and had a brief revival

in the immediate post-war period led by Martin Bulmer, Everett Hughes and Lloyd Warner.¹ The Chicago School distinguished itself from earlier approaches to the study of society by the coupling of ethnographic field methods with empirical investigations in order to show how the social institutions and physical environment in which people interacted shaped and constrained human behavior. The city of Chicago was the School's experimental research laboratory, and the setting for numerous studies by faculty and graduate students, aided by the resources of the Local Community Research Committee.

Other social scientific leaders at the University had moved their disciplines into greater engagement with empirical or behavioral research prior to the 1940s as well. The anthropologist Robert Redfield, who was trained in the department of sociology, extended the School's methods into the comparative analysis of the value systems of different cultures (Wilcox 2004). Charles Merriam in political science was deeply engaged in both the study and reform of city politics. Under his oversight, the political science department became a center for behavioral studies of political processes, elections and policies.² While he sometimes saw the sociologists' approach as too deterministic, he shared their desire for a social science built on systematic observation and aimed at providing knowledge that would deepen our understanding of the dilemmas of modern government (see Karl 1974; Seidelman 1985, 109-133; Heaney and Hansen 2006). The "original" behaviorist, John B. Watson, had of course been at Chicago early in the 20th century, and the department of psychology maintained a mixture of the experimental, social psychological, and pragmatist traditions of John Dewey, Watson, and George Herbert Mead.

But the real center of attention at the University of Chicago in the 1940s was the ongoing efforts of President Robert Hutchins to recreate the American university as a moral and cultural bulwark against the gathering storm that threatened the foundations of western society (Hutchins 1936). In his ruminations on modern society, Hutchins often referred to science as a quest for knowledge that had lost its moral foundations. Not surprisingly, many of the natural and social scientists at the University saw Hutchins' remarks, and his program for reform of the university,

¹ The historiography of the Chicago School of Sociology is at least as broad as that of the Chicago School of Economics, and perhaps historically deeper and better informed. Bulmer (1984) is a standard source on the early period; see Abbott (1999) and Tomasi (1998) for more recent studies.

² Should one speak of the Chicago School of Political Science separate from the Chicago School of Sociology? I have followed the lead of Kristen Renwick Munroe (2004) in identifying Merriam's behavioral movement before World War II as a program associated with the Chicago School of Sociology rather than as a separate School (for the latter view, see Almond 2004). Later in the paper, we'll see that Chicago political science in the post-war period does initiate a separate School.

as a threat. The ensuing battle was played out over the reorganization of undergraduate education, decisions regarding personnel and human resource policy, and the division of responsibilities and power between faculty and administration (see McNeill 1991; Dzuback 1991; Levine 2006). By the mid-1940s, undergraduate education was concentrated in the College of the University and followed a curriculum influenced by Hutchins' interest in an integrated approach to knowledge.³ The College had its own faculty and, for a few years in the early 1940s, admitted students as early as their third year of high school. Faculty members across the university operated under a four-quarter contract, and Hutchins played a significant role in most academic appointments. However, the president's efforts to exert more control over disciplinary-based graduate studies had been blocked by the faculty.⁴

The controversy between Hutchins and the faculty was the immediate context for the birth of the Committee on Social Thought. Despite their disagreement with Hutchins, a number of faculty members liked and respected him personally. Some, mostly humanists, actively supported his educational reforms. John Nef, the economic historian and humanist, was one of the latter; Frank Knight and Robert Redfield were among the former. In 1941, Hutchins and Nef began a series of lunchtime discussions⁵ with Knight, Redfield and a few others regarding the creation of an interdisciplinary program for graduate study of the relationship between values, culture and society. Hutchins had passively supported the creation of a couple of interdisciplinary "Committees" already (most notably the Committee on Human Development), but took an active role this time in promoting the creation of the Committee on Social Thought. In fact, it was Hutchins who provided the name: Nef wanted it to be called the Committee on Civilization. Hutchins chose the eventual title because he wanted to house the Committee in the Division of the Social Sciences, headed by Redfield and home to Nef and Knight (both in the economics department). Lengthy discussions over the next two years produced a plausible

³ The Great Books education that Hutchins and Mortimer Adler are famous for was never installed at Chicago in the undergraduate curriculum. Once Hutchins left Chicago, St. John's College in Baltimore, MD was created to initiate the educational program he had been unsuccessful in installing at Chicago. Later, Great Books programs returned to Chicago, usually in the form of adult education programs.

⁴ The 4-E contract provided higher salaries for faculty members, in exchange for which individual faculty members were responsible to turn over all outside income earned to the University (today we would say that the University owned the faculty's intellectual property). Hutchins' influence over appointments affected economics directly, by his refusal to hire George Stigler.

⁵ One indication of the level of controversy on campus in the early 1940s is the fact that these lunch discussions took place off-campus, so that others would not learn of them. See Wilcox (2004, 159, n.8) for more on the luncheons and discussions.

program of graduate study. Authorized by the Board of Trustees in 1942, the Committee on Social Thought opened its doors in 1943 to its first students (Wilcox 2004, 138-41; Dzuback 1991, 214-16).

Appetizers: Early Arguments about the Committee on Social Thought

While the Committee was born in the context of the struggle between President Hutchins and the faculty which had been going on for more than a decade, the arguments about what the Committee represented in terms of graduate study are worth examining separately. Hutchins had, perhaps, intended to undertake as wholesale a reform of graduate education as he did of undergraduate study, but faculty opposition was likely to be even stronger, and Hutchins began to seek a platform upon which to build an alternative form of graduate study. Nef was the mastermind behind the Committee's program of study, because he was devoted to bringing Hutchins' conception of learning into graduate education. As Nef said in his reflections at the end of Hutchins' presidency,

The great books of classical antiquity, of the Middle Ages and of early modern times, were almost invariably concerned with the whole problem of human experience. Consequently, unlike most of the research done by recent scholars, the study of a part was not pursued in isolation, but in relation to the other major parts. (Nef 1951, 406)

The modern academic disciplines, Nef argued, studied parts of human experience in isolation from each other. What was needed was an education that refused to isolate part of life from the rest of it. Thus, the goal of graduate education in the Committee was not the creation of experts in a discipline, but the cultivation of a community of wise scholars.

Naturally, no specific curriculum, or structured program of courses and other requirements, could meet such an objective (Boorstin 1948). And here the original group who created the Committee split. Hutchins and Nef laid out an educational program predicated on faith in human reason and grounded in the reading of classic texts or encounters with classic artwork, music and other creative expressions of the human faith in reason. Redfield and Knight shared with the others a deep concern regarding the specialization of disciplinary knowledge and need for both scientific and ethical reflection in an educational program. But they were skeptical

of *a priori* claims to know what human reason taught us. Their interest was in the process by which human communities create and judge truths within their specific cultural contexts.

While he was participating in discussions about the Committee with Hutchins, Nef and Redfield, Knight was also beginning to write a set of lectures that eventually shaped the work he did throughout the remainder of his career,⁶ as well as his portion of a book on economics and religion (Knight and Merriam 1945). In both the lectures and the book, Knight argued that, although economic rationality was universal in humans, study of human conduct also had to consider the political and ethical contexts in which it occurred. These contexts suggested that prudential action could take significantly different forms in different cultural contexts, given different sets of ethical values or political/legal processes. In fact, one of the first seminars in the Committee was a seminar that Knight taught with Law School professor Wilbur Katz on ethics, politics, jurisprudence and economics. The interrelation of these four disciplines was initially under consideration as one of several “fields” of study in the Committee (it was called “Four-Fold Field”).⁷

The debate between Knight, Nef and Hutchins over reason, culture, and truth eventually led to Knight removing his name from the Committee’s list of faculty in 1944.⁸ But the Knight dispute was not the most difficult argument the Committee had to overcome. After all, Knight agreed with Nef and Hutchins that a larger view of society was required in the face of modern challenges. Where they disagreed was on the question of whether reason alone could settle normative claims.

The more difficult intellectual challenge was convincing the disciplines to allow the creation of the Committee. After all, members of the Committee held that the contemporary challenges of a liberal society could be examined through a lens that did not involve significant graduate-level appropriation of the knowledge and competencies of any specific discipline. Surely intimate familiarity with the knowledge and methods of social *science* was necessary to the Committee’s goal? Ironically, however, this more difficult argument was relatively easy to

⁶ Knight delivered a series of lectures entitled “Freedom and Power in the Social Order” in March 1945 at Pacific University (for details, see Emmett 1999). His promise to produce a book based on the lectures was never accomplished, although a later version of the lectures was recorded and then turned into a book by James Buchanan’s Thomas Jefferson Center For Studies in Political Economy at the University of Virginia (Knight 1960).

⁷ Sociology and Anthropology was another potential field (Redfield’s influence), and a third combined several of the humanities.

⁸ He continued to receive notes of the executive committee’s meetings, and eventually rejoined the Committee in 1952.

deal with in the administrative context of a university. As long as Hutchins did not attempt to use the Committee to integrate the social sciences and humanities into one administrative or curricular entity (as he did with the College), and did not propose a program of study that was a direct competitor for students and resources of any of the disciplines in the Division of the Social Sciences, it would be left alone. In fact, because it presented an alternative that was not a direct challenge to the disciplines, they could even encourage its program. Milton Friedman once put it this way: it's not that there wasn't resistance, but "Chicago at the time ... was fluid enough to have a lot of different places where you could move, where you had the business school, you had the economics department, the law school, or you could set up something like the Committee on Social Thought It was possible to find a place of least resistance where you could find a little crack in the wall, some roots to take root, and break up the wall" (Kitch 1983, 189). Of course, Friedman was speaking of finding a place for people sympathetic to his approach to economics, but the point is equally true of the Committee!

The real rub was the competition for resources. In the first few years, the Committee largely drew on the gracious contributions of faculty members who wished to participate, and the department heads who allowed them to. But as the Committee began to search for new hires, resources were required. An obstacle that had not been anticipated was the refusal of departments to use their resources to hire well-known scholars from the field that fit the Committee's profile, but did not fit well with the department's own direction. The hiring of Daniel Boorstin, Edward Shils and Friedrich Hayek all fit this description: they were hired by the Committee without support from their respective disciplines (history, sociology and economics, respectively). Hutchins' support for the Committee was, of course, essential to its capacity to operate increasingly independently of the disciplines. An internal financial arrangement also allowed profits from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which the University of Chicago owned, to be used to fund the Committee's work.⁹ In addition, funds from outside sources also provided the means to hire new faculty: for example, the Volker Fund provided the means for Hayek's appointment (van Horn 2007), and both Nef and Knight privately supported the Committee.¹⁰ In

⁹ However, the *Encyclopedia* was never very profitable, and other sources were always necessary for the Committee's operation.

¹⁰ Nef's longtime financial commitment to the Committee, continued after his death in 1988 by his wife (Evelyn Steffanson Nef), resulted in the addition of his name to the Committee's in 2008. It is now the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought.

the longer run, the Committee benefited from the general rise in revenues to the University from the expansion of its student body in the postwar period.

Thus, despite internal disputation over the nature of the problem its program of study addressed, the external indifference to the Committee's creation facilitated by its non-competition for resources and students allowed the Committee to begin operation and sort out its program of study without significant opposition from the disciplines. By the early 1950s it had attracted bright students and some high-profile faculty to accompany those recruited internally. Among the Committee's faculty have been: Hannah Arendt, Daniel Boorstin, Allan Bloom, F.A. Hayek, David Grene, Saul Bellow, François Furet, Paul Ricoeur, Nathan Tarcov, Harold Rosenberg, Wendy Doniger and Hans Joas. The educational program and competencies those students and faculty would experience, however, was still taking shape.

Salad Course: Back to the Social Sciences

The postwar social science departments at Chicago were a mixture of various efforts to stabilize scientific methods of social inquiry. In the process, traditions were abandoned, resurrected, preserved and created. Because Chicago social scientists played such prominent roles in their respective disciplines, including educating the future faculty of many lower-tier university departments, what happened in Chicago did not stay in Chicago.

*Sociology*¹¹

Nowhere were the transitions from inter-war social science to post-war social science more obvious than in the sociology department. From 1945 to 1970 the department was in an almost constant state of transition and redefinition. The period started with the death, retirement and departure of the key remaining figures from the Chicago School: Louis Wirth died unexpectedly in 1952; in the same year William Ogburn retired and Herbert Blumer moved to UC-Berkeley; Ernest Burgess retired a year later. President Hutchins' antipathy to the School's empiricism, coupled with the department's lack of interest in social theory, led to the appointment of theorists who rose to prominence in either the College or the Committee on Social Thought rather than in the department: for example, Daniel Bell, Edward Shils, and David Reisman. Once Hutchins left

¹¹ The primary source for the account that follows is Abbott (1999). See also Turner and Turner (1990), Fine (1995), and Steinmetz (2007).

the University (1951) and the older members of the department were gone, the latent hostility between the qualitative and quantitative method camps split the department.¹² The appointment of demographer Phillip Hauser as department head in 1956 settled the methodological issue, and over the next decade most of the qualitative scholars left for other universities. Even then, the department went through several crises in the 1960s, concluding with the decision not to renew the contract of the radical feminist scholar Marlene Dixon that prompted a student strike in 1969. Throughout the period the University's administration had the department under a microscope because it could not seem to restore its "rightful" place at the leading edge of the sociology discipline.

The original Chicago School had begun the process of focusing sociological method on the acquisition of particular empirical research competencies (surveys, for example). The fragmenting of the sociology department in the 1950s was both the effect and cause of shifts in the new research competencies that sociologists were identifying as central to their work. While the historian of sociology is usually focused on how the disputes in the department were resolved in ways that both established stability and settled the methodological dispute in favor of quantitative competencies, for our purposes we can simply observe that the discipline of sociology as practiced at the University of Chicago in the post-war period did not include the development of research competencies in social theory. Shils, who started in the department, was moved to the Committee with the approval of the department in the 1940s, and was not given a joint appointment in sociology until well into the 1970s.

Stability came to Chicago sociology the early 1970s, at about the same time that the discipline of sociology in America began to diversity away from the methodological positivism that was the heritage of the earlier Chicago School (Fine 1995; Calhoun 2007). But the department's stability was created, not by a common approach, but by the balance of several research programs that had different methodological approaches. Demography and related population studies remained a consistently strong research area, but Morris Janowitz's arrival in the 1960s introduced a major research program in ethnographic studies of communities (with Gerald Suttles). William Julius Wilson joined the faculty in 1972 (he moved to Harvard in 1996), and was controversial figure in race studies. And Edward Laumann became a leader in the study

¹² The quantitative camp included Hauser, Don Bogue, Otis Dudley Duncan, Evelyn Kitagawa, and statistician Leo Goodman who taught quantitative methods for the department.

of organizational structures. Just as American sociology in the post-war period strayed away from a single set of disciplinary competencies, Chicago sociology became a leader in several empirical competencies that were not necessarily compatible.

*Political Science*¹³

As we have seen, Chicago's political scientists sat in the shadow of the Chicago School of Sociology in the interwar years. They emerged from that shadow in the postwar period, and not only because sociology was in the midst of its disintegration and reformulation. The foundation for their emergence was laid by Merriam, and the postwar Chicago School of Political Science continued and even strengthened the tradition of behavioral science that Merriam and his student Harold Lasswell had begun. But pre-war behavioral political science had been optimistic about using their scientific study as a vehicle for political reform: Merriam's forays into city, state and national politics were built on his assumption (like John Dewey) of the compatibility of science and reform. The postwar behavioralists, including Chicago's younger scholars like David Easton, Morton Kaplan, Leonard Binder, Aristide Zolberg, and Duncan MacRae, Jr., separated the scientific examination of behavior in the political process from normative considerations and the prospects of reform. Empirical work, for the postwar generation, was the consolidation of our understanding of how democracy actually worked in America and elsewhere, and not how it could be improved. From studies of American voting behavior to analyses of responses to public policies around the world and international relations, the Chicago political scientists made the university a leader in the field in the period from 1950 to 1970.

But the normative could not help creeping in. The domestic and international upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s could not be ignored, and behavioralists were ill-prepared for the call to political engagement. Comparativists and Americanists began to find connections between their studies around issues like modernization, democratization, and the political conflict associated with them. Even political theory regained some stature in the field, because behavioral politics confused the practice of American democracy with the definition of liberal democracy, and as the two were untwined, theorists were needed to sort out the issues.

¹³ The primary source for this section is Heaney and Hansen (2006), but see also the general discussion of behavioral political science in Seideman (1985, 149-221).

Ironically, Chicago was better prepared than some other places for the post-behavioral political science,¹⁴ because in 1950 the department (with the support of its young behavioralists) had hired the political theorist Leo Strauss. The department of political science could have done with Strauss what the department of sociology did with Shils – “encourage” him to move into the Committee on Social Thought. But political science made Strauss’ appointment a joint appointment with the Committee, and recognized him as a regular member of the department. In fact, most of his students received their doctorates in the department, rather than in the Committee. Thus, the department kept a strong connection with political theory open.

But in the 1970s, another post-behavioral movement in political science made inroads into political science: rational choice theory (Munroe 1991). The physical proximity of Chicago political science to Chicago economics made connection to the emerging Chicago School of Economics likely, but not necessary. After all, the two departments had little to do with each other over the previous fifty years.¹⁵ As rational choice theory made inroads elsewhere in the political science discipline (the University of Rochester, in particular), exploration of possible connections between the two departments became inevitable. In the post-war period, then, Chicago political science moved from being a leader in the competencies associated with behavioral political science to those associated with rational choice theory.

Economics

The history of post-war Chicago economics is similar to the development of the other social science disciplines, except that, in economics, the competencies the department developed differed substantially from the approach shared by much of the rest of the discipline. Thus, Chicago economists did not become narrowly focused on questions best answered by the tools of the discipline. Instead, they redefined the discipline, and refined a set of tools that the rest of the discipline had discarded (Emmett 2007). In the process of differentiating themselves from the rest of the economics discipline, the Chicago economists also differentiated themselves from the rest of the social sciences at Chicago. But once they redefined what the discipline of economics was about, the process of normalizing the science was similar to the process the other Chicago

¹⁴ Postbehavioralism was a term coined by Easton in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association (Easton 1969).

¹⁵ Ironically, Anthony Downs, author of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), which kicked off the rational choice approach to political science, was a visiting fellow in the economics department in 1960.

social sciences went through. Furthermore, eventually their redefinition of economic science provided a model that other social scientists at Chicago could use to redefine their sciences. Thus, after the 1980s, sociology and political science at Chicago both came to resemble the economics department in terms of the tools and techniques they employed.

Sorbet: The Rise of Multi-Disciplinary Research Centers

The goal of the committees that were created during Hutchins' presidency, such as the Committee on Social Thought and the Committee on Human Development, had been to bring scholars together on normative and epistemological issues in social thought which transcend narrow disciplinary competencies.¹⁶ The disciplines, as might be expected given the discussion of the previous section, did not take up Hutchins' approach to interdisciplinarity; creating instead their own version of interdisciplinary research. In the 1960s and 1970s the Center for International Studies, the Population Research Center,¹⁷ and the Morris Fishbin Center for the History of Science and Medicine were launched, and then in the period from the late 1980s to early 2000s, as federal monies became available under Title VI, NSF and other programs, multidisciplinary research centers emerged. All of these centers focused around research topics that were shared by faculty members and researchers from different disciplines, and are often conduits for grants from external sources, usually government and private foundations.¹⁸

The emergence of these centers provides a useful counter-example to the Committee on the development of interdisciplinary because the centers re-inforced the disciplinary trends. They assumed that each discipline contributed different competencies to the study of the topic of the center's research. Putting those different competencies together on common projects became the object of the research centers.

Main Course: The Committee on Social Thought as Antidote

The previous two sections showed that the University of Chicago's social science departments in the postwar period intensified the process begun in the interwar years of narrowing their

¹⁶ An interesting offshoot of the Committee on Social Thought was John Nef's Committee for Human Understanding, which was established in Washington, D.C. as a self-standing organization designed to provide the educational equivalent to the Committee on Social Thought for the world (see Nef 1973).

¹⁷ The Population Research Center has its roots in the National Opinion Research Center, begun in the 1920s by members of the Chicago School of Sociology, but operating independently by the 1960s.

¹⁸ The most recent of these centers has created the greatest controversy: the Milton Friedman Institute.

disciplinary focus to enable scientific methodologies to be employed. Differences exist across the fields, of course, not only in the fields' definition of what methods were scientific, but also in terms of the timing of the process. Sociology was initially divided between qualitative and quantitative methods before the demographers led the way into a more unified quantitative approach; political science was predominantly behavioral scientists with a bit of political theory until the early 1970s, when it became (like the larger discipline) more pluralistic, with a strong presence of rational choice. And in economics the Chicago School approach emerged in the 1950s from within what had been a pluralistic department and dominated economics (and the business, law and eventually public policy schools as well) for the remainder of the postwar period. When problems that crossed disciplinary borders arose, scholars set up multi-disciplinary research centers in order to bring together the various competencies.

Thus, with only a few exceptions (Knight, Strauss, Shils), Chicago scholars in the social science departments were less engaged with normative and epistemological questions in the postwar period than their predecessors had been previously. They were also increasingly less engaged with the classic texts usually identified as philosophical contributions to social, political and economic thought. The education of a social scientist had become the study of current theory (the outcomes from the discipline's competencies) and the methodological tools which would enable the student to competently contribute to the development and application of that theory; i.e., to become a researcher in the discipline. And, of course, the connections between the humanities and the social sciences, or between the social sciences and the social conversation about what it means to be human in our world – connections which had weakening since the professionalization of the social sciences at the turn of the 20th century – were now virtually non-existent.

The Committee on Social Thought, on the other hand, consistently sought to engage these questions. While Nef's optimistic vision of a return to a unified understanding of humanity and its cultures, grounded in a common moral vision of truth and beauty, was not shared by all the Committee's members, most agreed that understanding society required consideration of these "bigger" concerns: there is, Daniel Boorstein once said of the Committee, an "agreed concern with a common humanity in a Common universe. We would hope that our separate scholarly studies ... might help discover that community" (Boorstin 1948, 130).

Although the Committee began admitting doctoral students in the mid-1940s, only one student successfully completed a dissertation before 1950. Over the next decade, approximately 15 students graduated from the Committee's program. Three or four times that number were in the program; the Committee quickly became famous for stories about students who never completed and the length of time that those who did finish took. The Committee's impact on the University's academic life far exceeded the relatively small size of its student population. Hayek's seminar on the liberal tradition attracted faculty and students from across the university on a weekly basis. Arendt, Ricoeur, Strauss, Bloom, Bellow and the Committee's other intellectual luminaries had central positions on the intellectual landscape of the Midway. T.S. Eliot, Richard Tawney and other visiting scholars filled the University's largest lecture halls when they gave public lectures during their visits under the Committee's auspices. Its impact reflected partly the intellectual vitality of the University (an often-commented-upon theme), as well as the resonances between the Committee's focus and the undergraduate program of the College, which sought to prepare students for scholarly engagement wherever they might find it, including in the discipline they would eventually call their own (MacAloon 1992; Levine 2006).

Boorstin's article (1948) argues that the Committee recognized that true scholarship – scholarship which participates in the community formed by common agreement to seek an understanding of what it means to be human in this universe we share – is not formed by submission to disciplinary rules, but by freedom to pursue understanding where it takes the scholar.

For here our great *desiderata* are not the communication of present knowledge and accepted techniques, but rather the development of imagination and foresight, and the cultivation of the highest intellectual and artistic standards. (Boorstin 1948, 124)

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Committee pursued these objectives by requiring students to pass through three stages of evaluation by members of the Committee. The first stage occurred at admission to the program: the student had to present an outline of a program of study that the member of the Committee believed could be accomplished given the resources available to the Committee and/or the University. Proposals that were better suited to the narrower confines of particular departments were directed there, rather than to the Committee. The second stage was

the completion of a series of examinations which evaluated the student's preparation across the fields of study relevant to the student's proposal. In these early days, the Committee sought to identify a few areas of study which might be common to a number of students in the Committee and offer a standard examination in those fields: Boorstin (1948, 128) mentions Renaissance civilization and American civilization as examples. These examinations were not the end result of particular courses (remember that early on Knight and Katz had offered the "4-fold field" as a seminar); they operated in the same manner that field examinations in a graduate department did. The third stage was the completion of the dissertation. Table 1 provides a list of the dissertations completed during the 1950s.

The topics of the dissertations completed in the 1950s, and the fields that the Committee considered as common to students for their examinations, remind us that the chairman of the Committee – John Nef – had originally wanted the Committee to be called the Committee on Civilization. The programs of study in these early years could clearly be identified as "civilization studies" – students looked at broad movements in the histories of social, political and economic thought, often incorporating relevant or corresponding movements in the humanities and/or the arts. The focus of attention in the Committee began to change, however, as the definition of the "civilization" fields for common examinations became unwieldy and personnel in the Committee changed.

I am not yet certain at what point the stages of evaluation changed, although I expect the current framework was in place no later than the 1970s. The key changes are three-fold. Rather than placing the onus on the students (and mentors) for the determination of the early part of their study in the Committee, students must now select a sequence of courses (a phrase that Boorstin literally spat out in his article on the early program of study) that will direct the student into relevant areas of study or assist with the development of methods of analysis. Secondly, all students are required to pass an exam in a foreign language relevant to their self-constructed program of study (the pursuit of relevant foreign language study was encouraged but not required previously). Finally, each student must pass a "fundamental" examination before beginning work on a dissertation. The fundamental examination, therefore, replaces the general civilization studies exams that existed earlier in the Committee's history. The content of the fundamental examination is different for each Committee student, but one thing is common: the examination is based upon a set of about a dozen "texts" (most often books, but the list may also include a

group of films) that the Committee and the student agree upon. These texts must be of the highest quality, and must include at least one selection from each of three categories: imaginative literature; history and social theory; and philosophy, religion and theology. The student must read at least one of the texts selected in its original language. Regardless of the focus of the student's own focus, the list must contain works from both before, and after, 1500 (at least four texts in each case). 1500 was chosen as a rough approximation of the dividing line between modernity and pre-modernity. Students write their fundamental exams during their third year of study, and then continue on to dissertation research. The fundamental exam, therefore, has become the defining characteristic of the Committee's educational program. But that defining characteristic masks the underlying transformation of the Committee's focus from "civilization" to "text."

From "Civilization" to "Text"

Those familiar with the Committee over the past forty years may be surprised that few dissertations completed before 1960 were focused on specific texts. In fact, almost three-quarters of all the dissertations completed in the Committee since its inception identify, or allude to, the text(s) they examine in their titles. Given that the pre-1960 dissertations comprise a little less than ten per cent of the total, and only a couple of them appear to be focused on particular texts, over eighty per cent of dissertations completed after 1960 are text-based.

Why is the transformation from civilization to text important?

The original objective of the Committee was to reject the rule-based knowledge of the disciplines, in favor of a search for understanding of the human community that transcended disciplinary boundaries. But rejecting disciplinary rules also meant that the Committee had difficulty accepting common standards by which members of the scholarly community could be judged. Or to put it differently, the unstated standards by which the initial members of the Committee judged the high quality of its graduates needed to be codified in ways that students could recognize in order to progress through the Committee's program. Since the texts of a civilization were the artifacts that scholars in the Committee usually dealt with, coming to some agreement on a range of acceptable interpretive methods was a means by which standards could be defined outside of disciplinary boundaries. Texts in the humanities, philosophy, arts, social sciences, religion, the sciences, and even the professions could be examined by this common

lens. And, for our purposes quite important, rules for competent interpretation of texts could be agreed upon.

Of course, one danger in this approach is that several disciplines claim certain competencies in the reading of texts. In religious studies, those who read sacred texts have long struggled with the rules of proper exegesis, and could claim some authority, as could scholars in literature and intellectual history. From the dissertations which have been completed in the Committee since the 1960s, it is clear that the Committee has both welcomed and resisted the dialogue on interpretive methods with those who would claim authority on matters of interpretation. Whether it be new criticism, old criticism, Whig history, rational reconstruction, historical reconstruction, etc., all of these approaches have their impact on scholars in the Committee, but none of them has become the guiding principles, as they have in other fields. Instead, the Committee has maintained its focus on the use of texts as windows into how humans construct the communities that provide meaning, and what those meanings mean for modern life, especially in the social and political realms.

[NOTE TO CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS: this is where I have more work to do. I only put together the database of the CST dissertations recently, and so will need to provide some defense and examples of the claims just made.]

In the context of the post-war period, the interpretive competencies developed by the Committee were in demand, despite their marginalization in the social sciences, where they had been displaced by scientific methods of inquiry. While the disciplines formed the competencies that shaped the forefront of their fields and came to dominant the social scientific departments at research universities and most other institutions that sought to emulate them, the Committee provided the competencies that fueled a broader scholarship that was attractive to some universities and many liberal arts colleges. The graduates of the Committee, therefore, usually ended up in these institutions, where interdisciplinarity of the type that the Committee represented was valued for its educational contribution to both the formation of undergraduates and the maintenance of an intellectually vibrant community of citizens.

Dessert: A Delicious Irony

Robert Hutchins had hoped to reshape American higher education, reversing the trend toward the specialization of knowledge through an education based on classic works that focused on the foundational issues presupposed by all academic study. Faced with faculty opposition to reform graduate education across the University of Chicago along these lines, he and John Nef set out to create an alternative. The Committee on Social Thought has remained true to that large ideal, but has nevertheless developed its own set of competencies by which its members could be evaluated. Thus, the Committee fostered its own development of specialists – specialists in interdisciplinarity. Over time, the competencies required to be such a specialist became those required for particular kinds of textual interpretation. Thus, Hutchins' effort to overcome specialization became itself a specialization.

Table 1. Committee on Social Thought dissertations in the 1950s

Hodgson, Marshall	A Dissident Community in Medieval Islam: A General History of the Nizari Isma'ili's in the Alamut Period	1951
Letwin, Shirley	Utilitarians and Fabians: The Socialist Transformation of Liberalism	1951
Letwin, William L.	The Advent of Scientific Economics, 1660-1700	1951
Rush, Myron	Response to Disillusion: A Study in American Social Philosophy, 1880-1920	1951
Dixon, John W.	The Influence of Classical Sculpture on Donatello	1953
Lewis, Richard	The American Adam: The Drama of Innocence and Novelty in the Nineteenth Century	1953
Mahdi, Muhsin	Ibn Khaldūn's Philosophy of History	1954
Benardete, Seth	Achilles and Hector: The Homeric Hero	1955
Bloom, Allan D.	The Political Philosophy of Isocrates	1955
Gourevitch, Victor	The Philosophy of Life of Wilhelm Dilthey	1955
Rosen, Stanley H.	Spinoza's Argument for Political Freedom	1955
Hamburger, Joseph	The Philosophic Radicals: A Study of Bentham's Disciples in English Politics	1956
McClellan, Edwin	An Introduction to Soseki, A Japanese Novelist	1957
Wang, Yi C.	Chinese Intellectuals and the West	1957

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