

# Interdisciplinarity in World History



# Interdisciplinarity in World History:

## *Continuity and Change*

Edited by

Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk  
and Mahjoob Zweiri

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Interdisciplinarity in World History: Continuity and Change

Edited by Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk and Mahjoob Zweiri

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The organisation of the conference and the publication of this volume would not have been possible without the support of several institutions and individuals both within and outside Qatar University. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support and encouragement of the Dean’s Office, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University, and that of the Director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Doha.

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Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk

Mahjoob Zweiri

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# INTRODUCTION

This book originated from the proceedings of an international conference convened by the Department of Humanities at Qatar University in Doha from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2012. The conference's theme was "Interdisciplinarity in History: An Old Method in New World Context". Twelve of the fifty papers presented at the conference have been reviewed, thoroughly revised and compiled in this volume under the title "*Interdisciplinarity in World History: Continuity and Change*". The authors of the selected papers have used concepts and techniques developed by other social science disciplines to examine their works on various historical topics.

The phrase "an old method" in the subtitle of the conference theme emphasizes that "interdisciplinary history" is not a new concept in western historiography, as its origins can be traced back to the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the German historian Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915)<sup>1</sup> introduced the term "cultural history" as an umbrella label to describe his idea of a comprehensive approach to the study of the past. He defined his version of this cultural history as the comparative history of the factors of socio-psychic development. He then encouraged contemporary historians to transform psychology as a discipline into a collective social psychology, where historians could focus on the study of groups and situations rather

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Gotthard Lamprecht (1856-1915) was a German historian who developed a systematic theory of psychological factors in history. He received his university education at the universities of Göttingen, Leipzig, and Munich (1874-79), where his work concentrated on political and economic history. In 1878 he completed his doctoral dissertation on the 11<sup>th</sup>-century French economy at Leipzig. He was influenced by Jacob Burckhardt and his work on the *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. He made considerable forays into art history while constructing the theoretical scaffolding for his cultural historical program. He undertook these art historical studies during the 1880s, remarkably, the very years in which art history was first being shaped as a discipline at German universities. For further details, see Kathryn Brush, "The Cultural Historian Karl Lamprecht: Practitioner and Progenitor of Art History", *Central European History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1993): 139-164.

than single personalities.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, one may argue that his version was different in several important respects from that of his predecessors Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) and Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823-1897), because Lamprecht incorporated in his intellectual scheme the latest scientific findings of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and art history.<sup>3</sup> Thus he stressed a more systematic and scientific approach to interdisciplinary research in history and promoted cultural history as a genuine interdisciplinary enterprise.

Nevertheless, Lamprecht's ideas were discredited by German academic historians, who advocated the professional identity of history and denied the uniformity of his ideas with the established conceptual boundaries of the historical discipline. In contrast, his cultural history inspired American historians, who introduced the term "new history" on the eve of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> In identifying the key feature of new history, James Harvey Robinson (1863-1936)<sup>5</sup> wrote:

History's chances of getting ahead and of doing good are dependent on its refraining from setting itself off as a separate discipline and undertaking to defend itself from the encroachments of seemingly hostile sciences which now and then appear within its territory ... The bounds of all departments of human research and speculation are inherently provisional, indefinite, and fluctuating moreover, the lines of demarcation are hopelessly interlaced ... Each so-called science or discipline is ever and always dependent on other sciences and disciplines. It draws its life from them,

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<sup>2</sup> For further details on cultural history see, Elizabeth Fay, "Cultural History, Interdisciplinarity, and Romanticism", *Literature Compass*, vol. 3/5 (September 2006): 1065-1081.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Brush, "The Cultural Historian Karl Lamprecht", 141.

<sup>4</sup> For further details on Lamprecht's contribution see: Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (Studies in German Histories)* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> James Harvey Robinson (1863-1936) was one of the founders of the "new history" that greatly broadened the scope of historical scholarship in relation to the social sciences. After earning his M.A. Degree at Harvard University in 1888, he furthered his study at the universities of Strassburg and Freiburg, where he received his Ph.D. He started his academic career as lecturer of European history at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. In 1912 he published his book: *The New History*, New York: Macmillan. For further details see Michael Whelan, "James Harvey Robinson, The New History, and the 1916 Social Studies Report", *The History Teacher*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Feb., 1991): 191-202.

and to them it owes, consciously or unconsciously, a great part of its chances of progress.<sup>6</sup>

This approach motivated American historians to reorient their thinking and move towards a more ecumenical and methodically eclectic view of history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They perceived this shift as a new kind of specialization which built on and integrated the specializations of the discrete disciplines, instead of being observed as a new way of replacing specialization.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, one can maintain that Robinson's conception of "the new history" was a call for an expansion of the scope of historical inquiry, to be effected through the establishment of an intellectual alliance between history and the social sciences.<sup>8</sup>

In France, Herri Berr (1863-1954)<sup>9</sup> introduced the concept of historical synthesis, promoting the relationship between the three unified disciplines of society on the grounds that their collaboration would give a better understanding of man's role in the universe. "History by its fastidious research into the actions of individuals, sociology through its knowledge of social institutions and philosophy's innate understanding of the human intellect all combined to produce a holistic approach to the human sciences."<sup>10</sup> This approach was crystallized in Berr's statement of 1900 that "Historical synthesis is ... intended ... to induce ... various teams,

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in T.C. R. Horn and Harry Ritter, "Interdisciplinary History", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 1, No. 1, (1970): 429.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Whelan, "James Harvey Robinson, the New History, and the 1916 Social Studies Report", *The History Teacher*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Feb., 1991): 193.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Berr (1863-1954) was a French historian and philosopher who founded a series of Parisian institutes and journals dedicated to the synthesis of historical and scientific scholarship. He studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris (1881-1884), and earned his doctorate in 1899 with a thesis on philosophy and history. In 1900 he founded the *Revue de synthèse historique*, a journal devoted to the integration of history and the social sciences. It gained legitimacy in the field of scholarly journals and wielded considerable influence in the emergence of a new history that was expressed with the creation of the encyclopaedic collection *L'Évolution de l'Humanité*, run by Henri Berr himself and by Lucien Febvre, and then with the creation of *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew D. Cole, "The Idea of Historical Synthesis, Henri Berr and the relationship between History and Sociology in France at the beginning of the Twentieth Century", (Sheffield University, Department of Sociological Studies, *ShOP* Issue 8: March 2005)

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.71410!/file/8cole.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.71410!/file/8cole.pdf)

together, each to perform its particular function and to be of greater mutual assistance through a clearer conception of the common task".<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, Marc Bloch (1886-1944)<sup>12</sup> and Lucien Febvre (1878-1956)<sup>13</sup> were inspired by the concept of historical synthesis and produced a new alternative historical approach when they launched the first issue of their journal *Annales* in 1929. The *Annales* emerged as an intellectual platform for dialogue between various social sciences and remained open to new fields of research, comparative history, cultural analysis, and epistemological reflection.<sup>14</sup> The scope of the topics covered by the journal included social history and long-term trends, often using quantification and paying particular attention to geography and the intellectual worldview of common people. The narration of political events and the roles played by great individuals received less attention from the *Annales'* contributors, who were more concerned about historical patterns

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in T.C. R. Horn and Harry Ritter, "Interdisciplinary History", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 1, No. 1, (1970), 429.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Bloch (1886-1944) was a French medieval historian. He studied in Paris at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the École Normale Supérieure (1904-1908), and furthered his education at Berlin and Leipzig Universities. In 1919 he became lecturer in Medieval history at Strasbourg University, after the German professors were all expelled; he was called to the University of Paris in 1936 as professor of economic history. He is best known for his pioneering studies *French Rural History* and *Feudal Society* and his posthumously-published, unfinished meditation on the writing of history, *The Historian's Craft*. He cofounded the *Annales* school of French social history with Lucien Febvre in 1929, by starting the new scholarly journal, *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* ("Annals of economic and social history"), which broke radically with traditional historiography by insisting on the importance of taking all levels of society into consideration and emphasized the collective nature of mentalities. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://global.britannica.com/biography/Marc-Bloch>

<sup>13</sup> Lucien Paul Victor Febvre (1878-1956) was a French historian of the early modern period. He was educated in Paris at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the École Normale Supérieure (1899-1902), where he obtained his academic degree in history and geography. He took up a position at the University of Strasbourg in 1919, when the province was returned to France. While there, he became acquainted with Marc Bloch, who shared his philosophical and political approach, which brought the two men together. In 1929 they cofounded the *Annales* school of French social history and its scholarly journal, *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Sociale* ("Annals of economic and social history"). *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://global.britannica.com/biography/Lucien-Paul-Victor-Febvre>

<sup>14</sup> For further details see Forster, "Achievements of the *Annales* School", *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 38/1, (Mar., 1978): 58-76; Matthew D. Cole, 2005, [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.71410!/file/8cole.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.71410!/file/8cole.pdf)

that can be examined from social, economic, and cultural history, statistics, medical reports, family studies, and even psychological perspectives. As a result of its wide circulation, the *Annales* became the major source of inspiration to the advocates of interdisciplinary history in West Germany, Eastern Europe, England, and the United States.<sup>15</sup>

This mounting level of inspiration eventually resulted in the birth of “interdisciplinary history” in the United States in the 1950s. The term gradually became fashionable in professional historical studies in the 1960s, and gained wider recognition in 1970, when the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* was founded. The journal’s mission was to encourage “contributions that demonstrate the methodological connections with other disciplines that can throw light on the past”. As a result, interdisciplinary history received positive responses from professional academic historians, and the question of whether or not historians should borrow concepts and techniques from other disciplines became less debatable. Historians became much more concerned about the choice of concepts and methods that suited their research activities.

Considering these developments, the objectives of the international conference on “Interdisciplinarity in History: An Old Method in New World Context” were tailored to discuss problems and ideas relating to:

1. The changing understanding of historiography in modernity and post-modernity.
2. Challenges and opportunities for the status of history in modern and contemporary academia.
3. The relationship between history, social sciences, humanities, and applied sciences.
4. Problems and proposals in the periodization of world history.
5. Continuity and change in the writing of contemporary Arab history.
6. Pedagogical methodologies in history.

The twelve chapters of this book address these issues from various perspectives. **Chapter One:** “*Interdisciplinarity, Disciplines and Temporalities: Continuity or Discontinuity?*”, by Nils Riecken, raises the question of the relationships between different disciplines. In his submission, the author argues that the “inter” of interdisciplinarity involves three dimensions, including methodological overlaps of disciplines, the relationship between modern disciplines and older formations of knowledge, and the relationship between different historical formations (e.g. Islamic, Christian, Western European, Middle Eastern). In this

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<sup>15</sup> Cited in Horn and Ritter, (1970): 429.

context, he examines the works of the Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui, who, from the author's viewpoint, has developed a historical-epistemological perspective that examines the relationship between different disciplinary forms of knowledge in terms of their continuity and change. **Chapter Two:** "*Time and History: from Modernism to Neo-Traditionalism*", by Vsevolod Popov, examines the development of the concepts of historical time which developed in western culture and have been used as a strait-jacket for other cultures. It denies the universality of these concepts and argues in favor of new alternative concepts of historic time that suit other cultures. **Chapter Three:** "*The Relationship between History and other Disciplines*", by Robert Kramer, establishes its discussion with an assumption that "human experience encompasses many things: geography and chronology, demographics and disease, environment and ideology, technology and art". Therefore, the author argues that the separation of social science disciplines is a separation of convenience and does not serve the objectives of historical studies, which should be based on borrowed and modified concepts and techniques from other social science disciplines. To substantiate his argument, Kramer examines certain historical events and sources from the Sudanese Mahdiyya of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In **Chapter Four:** "*A Call for Reciprocity in Interdisciplinary Research*", Jan Kunas calls for greater reciprocity in interdisciplinary research, since there is a mutual relationship between economics and economic history. The author cites examples that show how economic concepts and techniques can be effectively used to examine certain historical events and analyze their development and collapse. **Chapter Five:** "*Rediscovering the Relationship Between Law And History: How to Teach Legal History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*", by Miso Docmanovic, deals with the latest trends, approaches and challenges in teaching legal history in the United States of America and Europe. It also focuses on the advancement of the interdisciplinary approach in law schools, where law students are encouraged to use historical methods and techniques to study certain legal cases. In **Chapter Six:** "*A World-Historical Archive: A Means to Link Humanities and Social-science Disciplines*", Patrick Manning focuses on the Pittsburg University research project entitled "*The Collaborative for Historical Information and Analysis (CHIA)*", launched in 2011. The objective of the project is to create a world-historical archive, addressing social, cultural, health, and climate issues worldwide for the past 400 years. The author maintains that the construction of the project requires the linkage and even unification of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. In his discussion, Manning highlights that the world-historical archive was

created to expand through world-wide collaboration, may be able to document the past of humanity as a whole and may also strengthen the links and interplay among various disciplines. **Chapter Seven:** “*The Western and Islamic Periodization of World History: A Preliminary Critique*”, by Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, attempts to critically study both Islamic and western views of universal history and the methodology they employ to classify history into periods defined by dates and labelled with specific characteristics. The author concludes that they all seem to be arbitrary and inaccurate, suggesting to history students that they continue their quest for a more satisfactory scheme of periodization. In **Chapter Eight:** “*Rethinking Ottoman History through the Study of Environmental History*”, Sabrina Joseph examines how environmental history in the context of Ottoman studies integrates methodologies and sources from the sciences, social sciences and humanities. After providing an overview of environmental history as a field of study, the author explores how environmental historians of the Ottoman period have drawn upon legal records, government archives, travelogues, art, literature, archaeology, and climate data to document and challenge the colonial narratives of the Middle Eastern environment and analyze the history of population patterns, climate change, natural resources, animals, disease, forests, and physical landscapes. Joseph also shows how the body of scholarship sheds light on indigenous narratives *vi-à-vis* the environment, promotes comparative research, and challenges the traditional periodizations that have long dominated the study of Ottoman history. **Chapter Nine:** “*Modern Empirical Psychology and History: Examples of Collaboration*”, by Aleksandra Porada, attempts to examine the relationship between history and psychology in terms of data collection and the examination of certain human behaviors from the collaborative perspective of the two disciplines. In **Chapter Ten:** “*Multidisciplinarity and Indian Ocean History: a New Methodological Approach*”, Serena Autiero presents an interpretative pattern and shows its effectiveness in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) networks. She shows how the study of the WIO routes will enhance our knowledge of international interactions in the Antiquity era. **Chapter Eleven:** “*History and Interdisciplinary Studies as a Catalyst for Post-Colonial African Historiography*”, by Elijah Terdoo Ikpanor, discusses the need for interdisciplinary methodologies in the reconstruction of past circumstances in African historiography. It notes that this attempt meets certain challenges in the peculiarity of African historiography, but it is an exercise that cannot be overruled in historical scholarship. In **Chapter Twelve:** “*The Speaking Stones of Islamic Tombstones as a Source of Historical Data: The Case of Southeast Asia*”,



Ahmed E. Wahby presents a qualitative stylistic analysis of the tombstone's form, decoration and epigraphy. He argues that tombstones reveal deeper levels of information regarding society, its allegiances, exchanges, and interactions with foreign cultures.

## Conclusion

The above discussion underlines the fact that interdisciplinarity in history has become a key term to professional historians who reject the professional identity of history based on its claimed autonomy and the distinctiveness of its research methods, and argue that this claim has seriously narrowed the intellectual horizons of the discipline in terms of teaching and research. The chapters of the volume also stress that historical research should not be confined to political events, as ancient historians carried it out, but rather open to other complex issues where we need a thorough investigation and collaboration between history and other disciplines. In this sense, interdisciplinarity in history is a process of answering questions, solving problems, or examining topics that are too broad or multifaceted to be tackled adequately by history as a discipline on its own. Therefore, history "should not be regarded as a stationary subject",<sup>16</sup> as Rebonson wrote, but as a discipline that can transcend the limitations formerly imposed upon the study of the past, and integrate with other social science disciplines to widen its methodological scope and enlighten us on many issues that have previously been ignored or marginalized.

Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk  
Mahjoob Zweiri  
Doha: 18<sup>th</sup> October 2015

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in Michael Whelan, "James Harvey Robinson, the New History, and the 1916 Social Studies Report", *The History Teacher*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Feb., 1991): 195.



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTERDISCIPLINARITY, DISCIPLINES AND TEMPORALITIES: CONTINUITY OR DISCONTINUITY?

NILS RIECKEN<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This chapter argues that the “inter” of interdisciplinarity involves three dimensions. These include methodological overlaps of disciplines (e.g. statistics), the relationship between modern disciplines and older formations of knowledge (e.g. modern sociology and Ibn Khaldun), and the relationship between different historical formations (e.g. Islamic, Christian, Western European, Middle Eastern). Moreover, the “inter” either refers to a homogenous field of knowledge that continues to be progressively built and subsumes all disciplines, or functions as a marker of discontinuity instead. The works of the Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui (\*1933) provide fresh insights into this highly debatable topic. He develops a dialectical, historical-epistemological perspective on interdisciplinarity that foregrounds discontinuity and, simultaneously, theorises the dialectical relation between discontinuity and the social creation of observed continuities. His approach makes disciplinary forms of knowledge legible as situated temporal forms. In doing so he manages to analyze and translate between different disciplinary forms of knowledge within a single analytic frame, while not leveling their respective differences. This chapter focuses on the three dimensions of interdisciplinarity, with special attention to Laroui’s works.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk for his comments on an earlier version of this text. I am also grateful to Cormac Walsh and Ruth Streicher for their help in editing this text.

## Siting Interdisciplinarity

It is often argued that putting true interdisciplinarity into practice is difficult because of the specialisation of modern academic disciplines – who could reasonably claim to master more than one discipline?<sup>2</sup> And who would deny that the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities follow different questions, deal with different objects, formulate different theories, and use different concepts, methods, and forms of representation? For instance, one would probably agree that research produced by a historian working on the history of fishing in the Mediterranean in the twentieth century would differ from research produced by chemists and biologists on cellular structures of fish or research by a sociologist working on fishermen or women working in fish factories in Morocco. But then again, one could also argue that the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities share a lot of questions, objects, theories, concepts, methods and forms of representation. For instance, they all inquire into the conditions of human life, albeit on different levels and in different forms.

Interdisciplinarity as a concept and as a practice thus confronts us with the question of how to adequately understand first the relationships between different disciplines, and second, the very form and unity of disciplines, which allow us to identify disciplines *as* disciplines, that is, a site where a particular form of knowledge that can be distinguished from other forms of knowledge, such as history, sociology, biology etc., is produced.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I develop a three-part argument on the problem of interdisciplinarity. First, starting from the observation that the interrelations of disciplines can be spelt out in different ways, I argue that it makes a major difference whether one situates disciplines and their interrelations within history and thus conceives of them as variable, or whether one treats the setup of disciplines and their interrelations as stable.

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<sup>2</sup> See the instructive examples in Gerhard Vollmer, "Interdisziplinarität - unerlässlich, aber leider unmöglich?," in *Interdisziplinarität. Theorie, Praxis, Probleme*, ed. Michael Jungert, et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), 47-75.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of debates on and understandings of interdisciplinarity: Thomas Sukopp, "Interdisziplinarität und Transdisziplinarität. Definitionen und Konzepte," in *Interdisziplinarität. Theorie, Praxis, Probleme*, ed. Michael Jungert, et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), 13-29; Michael Jungert, "Was zwischen wem und warum eigentlich? Grundsätzliche Fragen der Interdisziplinarität," in *Interdisziplinarität. Theorie, Praxis, Probleme*, ed. Michael Jungert, et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), 1-12.

I contend that these two views can be linked to two distinct epistemological attitudes. The first privileges discontinuity, the second privileges continuity. The perspective one adopts in this regard is, in my view, crucial for one's understanding of interdisciplinarity and disciplines themselves. Conceiving of the interrelations between disciplines and thus the disciplines themselves as stable privileges – epistemologically speaking – continuity. Conceiving of disciplines and their interrelations as variable privileges discontinuity instead. My point is that privileging either continuity or discontinuity is linked to implicit or explicit conceptions of what constitutes disciplines, scientificity, the historical development of disciplinary boundaries, and the history of knowledge.

For example, historians and scholars from other disciplines have long debated the question of whether history as an academic discipline can be truly scientific. Such a question presupposes a definition of what counts as scientific knowledge. Often the natural sciences, conceived of as exact sciences, figure as models for scientificity. Others reject this seemingly mono-disciplinary definition of scientificity, which focuses on the possibility of quantification, and rather emphasise that there are multiple forms of scientific knowledge. In my view, questioning the very standards of scientificity and the models upon which they are built belongs to the critical enterprise of the humanities and the social sciences. Put otherwise, the task is to critically question and historicise existing rules of practice.<sup>4</sup> My point here is that the answer to this question – what is scientific? – hinges on one's perspective on the history of knowledge and the historical development of disciplinary boundaries, that is, whether one privileges continuity or discontinuity.

Any observer considering disciplines and their mutual relations – me, the reader of this text, a historian, a biologist, a theologian etc. – can either privilege continuity or discontinuity while doing so. Making this choice leads to the two aforementioned different views of the interrelations of disciplines representing certain forms of knowledge as either basically stable or variable. Treating the interrelations of disciplines as stable leads to a typological view of disciplines, while considering them variable

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<sup>4</sup> I concur here with the perspective developed on disciplinarity by Judith Butler, who argues that one should not primarily define disciplines according to rules that are supposed to guarantee a scientific standard. This does not imply that such rules are not useful. But her argument is that to bind ourselves from the start to such rules is essentially conservative, because it obliges us to stick to a certain epistemic frame that we are not allowed as scholars to question without becoming un-scientific. See Judith Butler, "Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 773-795.

renders any strictly typological view of disciplines problematic. Whereas a typological view conceives disciplines in terms of continuity, a genuinely historical view conceives them in terms of discontinuity. In the first case, one can claim that one discipline defines the standards and the form of science, as in the example just mentioned (or, for that matter, theology), and that various disciplines produce knowledge that adds up like individual pieces of a puzzle to a seamless whole. From this perspective, to use another metaphor, knowledge can be thought of as a house that is continuously enhanced, enlarged and perfected. Every piece added to its structure subsequently makes it a better house because, first, this perspective presupposes that the basic architecture of the house stays the same in this process and, second, the accumulation of knowledge leads asymptotically towards a point at which knowledge about the world will have been perfected.<sup>5</sup>

However, privileging discontinuity instead renders this conception of the history of knowledge problematic. What appears problematic is the particular way in which the previous view conceptually frames the history of knowledge as a linear, continuous, asymptotical process of accumulation. But when observers emphasise discontinuity, to take up this metaphor again, the house representing knowledge is constantly fractured, de-centred and shifted like a cubistic image. In this case, the continuity of the process in which a house is being built and perfected cannot be taken as given. Privileging discontinuity makes it clear that privileging continuity – and thus assuming, again metaphorically speaking, a given house with a set structure whose development is already clear – occludes other possible ways of building and further developing this house of knowledge. Privileging continuity necessarily overemphasises *one* particular perspective, from which such a continuous accumulation of knowledge *may* be observed, while disregarding other perspectives that cannot be *adequately* fit into the particular frame that projects the line of linear progress of knowledge and its goal in a particular way.<sup>6</sup> Constructivist perspectives typically privilege discontinuity and thus identify views of the history of knowledge that privilege continuity as

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<sup>5</sup> Using the same metaphor, while not questioning the main architectural format of the “house”: Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (Munich: Hanser, 2013). 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of an accumulative, continuist view of the history of knowledge see Achim Landwehr, “Diskurs – Macht – Wissen. Perspektiven einer Kulturgeschichte des Politischen,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 85(2003): 71-117; Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

ex-post rationalisations of the evolution of knowledge that actually create coherence and continuity out of incoherence and discontinuity.<sup>7</sup>

The second part of my argument is that in the tension between these two epistemological attitudes towards the interrelation of disciplines, there is much more at stake than “only” the relationships between disciplines as such. My point is that the question about the possibilities and limits of interdisciplinarity lead us to the very heart of debates on modernity and its place in global history. What is at stake here is the (observed) unity of the (modern) world, the character of “our” “modern” knowledge about the world, its relation to other – earlier or contemporary, non-modern – formations of knowledge; in other words, our assumed capacity to develop more adequate and reliable descriptions of the world than others<sup>8</sup> in order to change and master it, and, thus, the particular historicity of modernity, i.e. its location within time, space and history. I thus suggest locating the problem of interdisciplinarity not only in the “problem-space”<sup>9</sup> of the interrelations of modern disciplines, but also in the global history of modernity and its discontents.

To be sure, the emphasis on discontinuity does not necessarily negate the fact that the modern sciences have apparently *increased* the available scope of knowledge, potentially enabling material progress (one could think of health care, aviation, computer technology, architecture etc). Such a story of progress has also been told with respect to the object of the humanities and the social sciences, namely the human as a social being. Enlightenment and progressive modernisation have been two major elements of grand narratives that tell the history of the modern human being as an optimistic history of progress (democracy, freedom, emancipation, etc). But these grand narratives have not gone unquestioned. Whereas few would deny that our knowledge of the human as a *physical* being has tremendously increased, many have objected to the straightforwardly positive view of the grand narratives of Enlightenment and progressive modernisation.

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<sup>7</sup> A typical metaphor of views of the history of knowledge that privilege continuity is “growth”. A constructivist perspective would rather reject such an organic metaphor for the historical process because it insinuates a seemingly primordial coherence and continuity in the historical process itself. In contrast, constructivist perspectives emphasise that coherence and continuity are always *produced* instead of being simply “out there”.

<sup>8</sup> I should add that this applies to other disciplines as well. I will come back to this point below.

<sup>9</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004). 3-4.

A key element of these objections is the opposition to and the critique of Eurocentric definitions of progress. Critiques of Eurocentrism have questioned these grand narratives insofar as they represent a story of human progress that is tied to a vision of humankind exclusively defined by and in terms of “western” modernity. What these critiques contest is the practice of defining concepts such as “humankind” exclusively within a frame of reference defined as “western modern”, thus asserting the continuity and coherence of something called “the modern West”. Such a view implies that there is only one legitimate and viable path to progress. In this picture, non-western actors can neither really be the true authors of knowledge, nor are they allowed to take part in the definition of “humankind” or the paths and ends of “progress”. Debates on Eurocentrism revolve to a large degree around these very problems: which kind of knowledge is valid for which time and which place? Is there one rationality or many? Which forms do we deem progress-oriented – or at least useful to the contexts we and others live in as political beings – and which ones do we not, and for what reasons? And how are we to understand “progress” in the first place?<sup>10</sup>

While postcolonial and other critiques – e.g. in the name of relativism, indigenous “authenticity” (*aṣāla*), and the Arab-Islamic heritage (*turāth*) – have drawn attention to the limits of Eurocentric accounts of (the history of) knowledge, these critiques themselves do not necessarily share the same view thereof. The question is, then, how can we translate between these different accounts of (the history of) knowledge and which account is more adequate if we do not want to stop at saying that all accounts are equally valid – a position that inevitably leads us into the chasms of relativism? Put otherwise: how do we adequately translate different disciplines as bodies and modes of knowledge across time and space?

These considerations allow us to unpack some assumptions underlying the category of the “inter” of interdisciplinarity as an in-between space in between “disciplines”. This unpacking helps to properly account for what is actually at stake in referring to this “inter” between multiple disciplines. If we understand interdisciplinarity as the problem of how to understand the relationships between different disciplines, I argue that the “inter” involves three dimensions: first, the relations and overlaps between

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<sup>10</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Reissue, with a New Preface by the Author) (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Römheld, eds., *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, 2., erw. Auflage ed. (Frankfurt a.M. and New York: Campus, 2013).



modern academic disciplines with regard to topics, sources, methods and research techniques (e.g. nature, human relations, interpretation, statistics); second, the relation between modern disciplines and older formations of knowledge (e.g. modern sociology and Ibn Khaldūn), and third, that between different socio-historical contexts (e.g. Christian and Islamic, Euro-American, North African, and Middle Eastern). The crucial question that arises is again, in my view, whether these different in-between spaces of the disciplines form part of a *homogenous* field of knowledge that *continues* to be progressively built or whether the “inter” functions as a marker of *discontinuity* and a *heterogeneous* set of formations of knowledge instead.

An adequate, historically informed view of interdisciplinarity and the “inter” in this regard therefore requires an analytic framework that is able to account for *different* views of the interrelations of disciplines within history, that is, different conceptions of the interrelations of formations of knowledge and, thus, disciplines. Specifically, such an account cannot take a certain understanding of *difference* – e.g. between certain disciplines or formations of knowledge – as given *a priori*. If it did, it would make itself blind as regards its core question about the *difference* between different formations of knowledge and disciplines, which allows us to ask the very question about the possibilities and limits of *interdisciplinarity* in the first place. For instance, when considering the relationship between modern disciplines and older formations of knowledge, as well as between disciplinary knowledge produced in different socio-historical contexts, one can simply take neither the distinction between the “modern” and the “pre-modern” nor the demarcations between different socio-historical contexts such as “the West” and “Islam” for granted, for in this case one would already accept a certain *historical* way of observing continuities and discontinuities and thus exempt them from closer scrutiny.

My point is, however, not to look for a *philosophical* definition of a putatively correct notion of difference. I think it is rather to ask the *historical* question about how people have taken explicit or implicit recourse to possibly different notions of difference while making arguments about “modern”, “Islamic” and “rational” knowledge. What matters in my view is the notion of difference one adopts when one identifies such formations as different *in relation to each other*. It is important that, simply by naming or observing a historical phenomenon, such as a discipline, we *draw a distinction* between the thing demarcated as a discipline and what it is not *from this perspective*. Therefore, we can study the logic of how distinctions are being drawn and, thus, difference is

construed on this basis.<sup>11</sup> This plea for a *relational* perspective applies both to me as a historian, writing this text, and the historical actors whose lives we historians investigate. From this perspective it seems useful to analyze how academics and non-academics have conceived the relations between different formations of knowledge, possibly in both different and similar ways. To accept such a framework of analysis implies asking about epistemic limits and how boundaries are drawn within *intellectual practices*.<sup>12</sup>

The third part of my argument is that the epistemology of history developed by the Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui (\*1933) provides precisely an analytic framework that helps us to think through the problem of interdisciplinarity from a *relational* and *temporal* perspective. Laroui developed his epistemology of history in a postcolonial context in which he was confronted with the “inter-presence”<sup>13</sup> of different formations of knowledge. Above all, he was confronted with the observed difference between “modern western” and “Islamic” formations of knowledge, as well as the question of how translation between these is possible. While trying to answer this question, Laroui’s epistemology of history examines from a historical-epistemological viewpoint all three aforementioned dimensions of the “inter” of interdisciplinarity, that is, overlaps of topics, sources and methods, the relation between modern disciplines and older formations of knowledge, and the relation between different socio-historical contexts.

Laroui’s perspective leads to a dialectical view of continuity and discontinuity between different disciplines, understood as formations of knowledge and ways of representing time and history. His approach allows the historicisation of the representations of time that underlie what we call sources and disciplines, as well as the notions of historical difference that, as I pointed out, allow us to speak of interdisciplinarity in the first place. Adopting such a historical-epistemological perspective helps, I contend, to transcend common distinctions between modern and

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<sup>11</sup> This relates to Niklas Luhmann’s observer theory, which builds on this systems theory. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997). I follow the logic of his argument that we should study observations as distinctions, i.e. contingent choices among other possible ways to observe within semantic fields and that we thus have to follow certain socially situated logics and pay attention to the positionality of observers.

<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Pierre Bourdieu, “Thinking About Limits,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 9(1992): 37–49.

<sup>13</sup> Arif Dirlik, “Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice,” *Cultural Critique* 6(1987): 40.

older, European and Middle Eastern traditions of knowledge, and the exact sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, while not levelling their respective differences.<sup>14</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, I will develop my overall argument in three steps. First, I think it is necessary to situate Laroui's position within the debates over realist and constructivist, as fundamental epistemological stances, in order to adequately contextualise both Laroui's overall argument and my own argument, which builds upon these debates and Laroui's argument. In doing so, my aim is to show that both positions – realist and constructivist – impose a certain understanding of difference in the position of *observer*. Second, I will make clear that Laroui's epistemology of history makes a convincing case for a view that privileges discontinuity and emphasises radical historicity, but at the same time theorises the *historical* production of continuity against the backdrop of discontinuity. In this regard, I will also address the much-discussed question of whether there can be a meta-language that can translate between different conceptual frames and ways of conceiving difference. Third, I will discuss how Laroui's notion of multiple temporalities allows him to develop a historical and dynamic understanding of interdisciplinarity that pays attention to both the systematic and the historical dimension of disciplines and knowledge.

### **Realist and Constructivist Views of Interdisciplinarity and Difference**

In this first step, I will discuss how realist and constructivist perspectives lead to different views of interdisciplinarity and difference. An adequate understanding of these two contrasting epistemological standpoints is, in my view, necessary in order to understand the stakes involved in Laroui's argument and its place within wider debates on methodology. In order to explain this, I turn back for a moment to the metaphors of the house and the puzzle that I introduced as models for how the history and unity of knowledge can be conceptualised. Seen from this perspective, realist and constructivist<sup>15</sup> stances imply two mutually

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<sup>14</sup> The historian of science Jürgen Renn recently made a similar plea: Jürgen Renn, "Historical Epistemology and Interdisciplinarity," in *Physics, Philosophy, and the Scientific Community*, ed. Kostas Gavroglu, John Stachel, and Marx W. Wartofsky, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1995), esp. 241.

<sup>15</sup> The term postmodern is also used for constructivist positions, which I find, however, misleading.

opposing ways of conceiving the relationship between modern disciplinary formations of knowledge. The terms “realist” on the one hand and “constructivist” and “postmodern” on the other refer to certain positions in a wider debate on methodology and, albeit much less openly, the understanding and the epistemic location of the discipline of history.<sup>16</sup> I have pointed out above that one’s privileging of either continuity or discontinuity leads to different views of those metaphors and thus the concept of knowledge. The privileging of either of these – continuity or discontinuity – implies privileging a certain view of time as either continuous or discontinuous. My point is that this epistemic and temporal difference is related to the opposition between realism and constructivism. While the realist perspective privileges continuity and an accumulative notion of knowledge, it also insists that the past can be described as “historical reality”, even though realist historians would of course admit that this necessitates multiple steps of source criticism. But the term “historical reality” as used by historians still implies, after all analysis, and despite all admitted difficulties, that one can re-present or mirror the past as it (actually) was within a consistent picture.<sup>17</sup> This perspective assumes that, no matter from where we observe the past, we and everybody else, including those living in that past, are speaking about the same thing, namely a certain given “historical reality”.

Those who argue from a constructivist perspective consider such an outlook epistemologically dissatisfactory, for it assumes a continuity and a unity that is not given from the perspective of constructivism. Moreover, it does not make clear who observes this “historical reality” or from where, i.e. whose reality it is or was we are talking about. Realist voices have often interpreted this constructivist or so-called postmodernist position as a dismissal of any concern with reality and objectivity at all. While this might be true in some cases, I would argue rather the opposite.

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<sup>16</sup> Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 1-24; Keith Jenkins, "A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin," *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (2000): 181-200; Perez Zagorin, "Rejoinder to a Postmodernist," *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (2000): 201-209. See also Rainer Maria Kiesow and Dieter Simon, eds., *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Wahrheit. Zum Grundlagenstreit in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Mit Beiträgen von Lorraine Daston u.a.* (Frankfurt a.M. and New York: 2000); Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Unsichere Geschichte. Zur Theorie historischer Referentialität* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001); Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*; Foucault, *L'archéologie*.

<sup>17</sup> This refers to the well-known dictum by the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke.

Constructivism was born out of a heightened sense of how problematic our access to the real is and represents an attempt at improving our means for grasping the real. In other words, constructivist perspectives have been adopted out of a concern with epistemology and methodology and thus objectivity.<sup>18</sup> What they call into question, however, is the so-called correspondence theory of truth. They challenge the notion of knowledge underlying the realist view, which subdivides knowledge into discrete elements that, according to this view, all add up to a larger whole. They refute the notion that there is one epistemic frame that is alone sufficient to *adequately* describe the world – like a puzzle – because the latter is always *apprehended* by multiple observers producing multiple accounts of the world that do *not* add up like pieces of a puzzle. While a realist perspective could subscribe to an emphasis on the plurality of perspectives on history, the constructivist perspective goes further by not only questioning the unity – and temporal continuity – of the observer’s position, but also of the observed (“the past” as multiple pasts) that cannot be de-linked from the observer’s position while observing it. Thus, for the constructivist, the truth is not inscribed into nature or the past or the world as such. It is not simply “out there” as a given y-axis to which we can seek to get closer like an asymptote. The world can be apprehended only by virtue of our categories, which in turn have a history that we can only apprehend by virtue of our categories. If history is conceived as an open-ended process, no category can be taken as complete in relation to an “original”. It cannot fully grasp the world because the world is constantly evolving. This perspective clashes with the image of a y-axis of (perfect) knowledge that we could possibly arrive at in some near or distant future.

Such a constructivist stance is not necessarily relativist, as realists sometimes assert. If this was true, adopting a constructivist stance would merely imply a relapse into the additive logic of the realist view, i.e. putting different elements of knowledge side by side or, in this case, putting different formations of knowledge side by side. To point it out again, constructivist perspectives, while emphasising the plurality of disciplinary formations of knowledge and their interconnectedness, insist that these formations *cannot* be *seamlessly* fitted into one epistemic frame. The point constructivist perspectives stress is that any “fact” has to be communicated *within* human communication. It is important to note that this constructivist argument does not say anything yet about the validity of the knowledge in question. For instance, the fact that the knowledge

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<sup>18</sup> In my view “constructivism” cannot be reduced to a “textualist” understanding of the social. See e.g. Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*.

produced within the natural sciences – e.g. the knowledge that is used to build bridges and skyscrapers – is bound to human communication does not diminish its relative reliability, because it has been developed on the basis of a trial-and-error principle.<sup>19</sup> But the description of the world *as such* is not already inscribed into the latter, needing simply to be discovered piece by piece, as constructivists argue. For them the world *as such* is attainable neither for historians nor natural scientists.<sup>20</sup> It is only attainable via our communication, within which continuity has to be continuously produced against the contingencies of the world.<sup>21</sup>

It should be clear by now that the version of constructivism described is not the form of constructivism historians have often criticised for giving up any concern with describing the real world. On the contrary, its focus lies on epistemological and methodological issues. Constructivists highlight these methodological issues because realist perspectives do not discuss them because of their own epistemic framework, which privileges continuity. Therefore, this form of constructivism represents a critique of the epistemic foundations of realism itself.

What is characteristic for this form of constructivism is that it radically historicises seemingly given entities such as “reality”, “the present”, “the past” and “the future”. These become visible not as given, but as categories used by observers to make sense of the world at given points in time. They are thus located within *history*. In this way, we are taken towards a radically *processual* understanding of culture. In contrast, on this level, realist perspectives imply a rather static understanding of the social.<sup>22</sup> This links up with what I called the privileging of discontinuity.

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<sup>19</sup> Hubert Reeves, *Schmetterlinge und Galaxien: kosmologische Streifzüge. Aus dem Französischen von Friedrich Griese* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1992); Philipp Sarasin, *Darwin und Foucault: Genealogie und Geschichte im Zeitalter der Biologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> He argues that only God can discursively fulfill the role of an observer who can describe the world as such, i.e. not being bound to a particular observer position. See Niklas Luhmann and André Kieserling, eds., *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 156, 158-159.

<sup>21</sup> Luhmann distinguishes between biological, psychic and social systems, all of which are constantly communicating in order to reproduce themselves. See Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> I understand the term “culture” in a wide sense, as it is used in cultural history. See Andreas Reckwitz, “Die Kontingenzzperspektive der Kultur”. Kulturbegriffe, Kulturtheorien und das kulturwissenschaftliche Forschungsprogramm,” in *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften. Band 3: Themen und Tendenzen*, ed. Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2008), 1-20;