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Matthew K. Gold

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Sunset for Ideology, Sunrise for Methodology?

TOM SCHEINFELDT

Sometimes friends in other disciplines ask me, “So what are the big ideas in history these days?” I then proceed to fumble around for a few minutes trying to put my finger on some new ism or competing isms to describe and define today’s historical discourse. Invariably, I come up short.

Growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, we are prone to think about our world in terms of ideologies and our work in terms of theories. Late twentieth-century historical discourse was dominated by a succession of ideas and theoretical frameworks. This mirrored the broader cultural and political discourse in which our work was set. For most of the last seventy-five years of the twentieth century, socialism, fascism, existentialism, structuralism, poststructuralism, conservatism, and other ideologies vied with one another broadly in our politics and narrowly at our academic conferences.

But it wasn’t always so. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship was dominated not by big ideas but by methodological refinement and disciplinary consolidation. Denigrated in the later twentieth century as unworthy of serious attention by scholars, the nineteenth and early twentieth century, by contrast, took activities like philology, lexicology, and especially bibliography very seriously. Serious scholarship was concerned as much with organizing knowledge as it was with framing knowledge in a theoretical or ideological construct.

Take my subdiscipline, the history of science, as an example. Whereas the last few decades of research have been dominated by a debate over the relative merits of constructivism (the idea, in Jan Golinski’s succinct definition, “that scientific knowledge is a human creation, made with available material and cultural resources, rather than simply the revelation of a natural order that is pre-given and independent of human action”), the history of science was in fact founded in an outpouring of bibliography.¹ The life work of the first great American historian of science, George Sarton, was not an idea but a journal (*Isis*), a professional society (the History of