



PROJECT MUSE®

Debates in the Digital Humanities

Matthew K. Gold

Published by University of Minnesota Press

Matthew K. Gold.

Debates in the Digital Humanities.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Project MUSE. Web. 8 Feb. 2015<http://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780816681440>

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

Science Society), a department (Harvard's), a primer (his *Introduction to the History of Science*), and especially a bibliography (the *Isis Cumulative Bibliography*).² Tellingly, the great work of his greatest pupil, Robert K. Merton, was an idea: the younger Merton's "Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England" defined history of technology as social history for a generation.³ By the time Merton was writing in the 1930s, the cultural climate had changed and the consolidating and methodological activities of the teacher were giving way to the theoretical activities of the student.

I believe we are at a similar moment of change right now that we are entering a new phase of scholarship that will be dominated not by ideas but once again by organizing activities, in terms of both organizing knowledge and organizing ourselves and our work. My difficulty in answering the question, "What's the big idea in history right now?" stems from the fact that, as a digital historian, I traffic much less in new theories than in new methods. The new technology of the Internet has shifted the work of a rapidly growing number of scholars away from thinking big thoughts to forging new tools, methods, materials, techniques, and modes of work that will enable us to harness the still unwieldy, but obviously game-changing, information technologies now sitting on our desktops and in our pockets. These concerns touch all scholars. The Center for History and New Media's Zotero research management tool is used by more than a million people, all of them grappling with the problem of information overload. And although much of the discussion remains informal, it's no accident that Wikipedia is right now one of the hottest topics for debate among scholars.

Perhaps most telling is the excitement that now (or, really, once again) surrounds the library. The buzz among librarians these days dwarfs anything I have seen in my entire career among historians. The terms "library geek" and "sexy librarian" have gained new currency as everyone begins to recognize the potential of exciting library-centered projects like Google Books.

All these things—collaborative encyclopedism, tool building, librarianship—fit uneasily into the standards of scholarship forged in the second half of the twentieth century. Most committees for promotion and tenure, for example, must value single authorship and the big idea more highly than collaborative work and methodological or disciplinary contribution. Even historians find it hard to internalize the fact that their own norms and values have and will again change over time. But change they must. In the days of George Sarton, a thorough bibliography was an achievement worthy of great respect and an office closer to the reference desk in the library an occasion for great celebration. (Sarton's small suite in study 189 of Harvard's Widener Library was the epicenter of history of science in America for more than a quarter century.) As we tumble deeper into the Internet age, I suspect it will be again.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as Tom Scheinfeldt, “Sunset for Ideology, Sunrise for Methodology?,” *Found History*, March 13, 2008, <http://www.foundhistory.org/2008/03/13/sunset-for-ideology-sunrise-for-methodology/>.

1. Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

2. George Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1962); *History of Science Society, Isis Cumulative Bibliography: A Bibliography of the History of Science Formed from Isis Critical Bibliographies 1–90, 1913–65* (London: Mansell, 1971).

3. Robert K. Merton, “Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England,” *Osiris* 4 (January 1, 1938): 360–632.