TOWARDS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DEFINITION OF THE
SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT
Philosophical views on the relationship between history and the social sciences play a fundamental role in defining the social-scientific approach to the New Testament. Definitions of the approach are, on the one hand, determined by a supposed antithesis between history and the social sciences/sociology, and, on the other hand, by an ignorance of the effects of different perspectives on the relationship between them. The development of an interdisciplinary approach, encompassing history and the social sciences, provides an alternative. It consists of a different set of presuppositions and theoretical principles for defining not only historical and sociological study, but also the social-scientific approach.

1 INTRODUCTION
Many practitioners of the social-scientific approach towards understanding the New Testament and its world, share the basic assumption that any communication can only be understood properly within the social and cultural codes from which it originated. Since it is accepted that the texts presuppose and encode information from the social system in which they emerged, the meanings communicated in them can only be ascertained with the help of information from those social and cultural systems (see Malina 1983a:12; Elliott 1990b:9). Not taking these settings seriously can, according to Malina, only lead to a misinterpretation of the texts (see 1983b). In the words of Meeks: 'If we do not see their world, we cannot claim to understand early Christianity' (1983:2). In one word, 'To understand any sort of communication, both sender and receiver of the message must share some social scenario; otherwise the result is noise, or putting

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1 This is a revised version of a paper read at a NTSSA subgroup meeting in Pretoria on 1990-10-30. The second part of that paper, as revised, is a discussion on models and the use of models in a social-scientific approach (see Craffert 1990).

2 From the wide variety of models and theories used it becomes clear that there is no one unified approach but rather various different approaches included under the rubric of the social-scientific interpretation. However, on a high level of generalisation, such as on general assumptions which are widely held or the aim of interpretation which is generally recognised, it is appropriate to talk about the social-scientific approach. It is in the latter sense that the concept is used in this study.

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words into the mouth of the sender: in other words, the result is a distorted message' (Malina 1986b:150).

The aim of the social-scientific approach follows logically from this assumption: a reduction of 'socially anachronistic and ethnocentric reading' (Rohrbaugh 1987:23; and see Elliott 1983:xvi) of New Testament texts and 'to achieve a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the biblical documents and of the societies in which they emerged' (Elliott 1990b:6). The basic aim of the social scientific approach, to say it again, is contrary to the theological or history of ideas approach which has dominated New Testament studies for many decades (see Holmberg 1990:2), to 'be consistently historical and descriptively holistic' (Stowers 1985:149). What is needed is a 'hermeneutics of social embodiment' where the aim is to 'uncover the web of meaningful signs, actions, and relationships within which that text did its work' (Meeks 1986:179).

Broadly speaking, besides this assumption on the contextual nature of communication and the aim of reducing anachronistic interpretations, there is hardly any consensus as to the definition of the social-scientific approach. At least two opposing schools (see Botha 1989:486) can be identified which represent different methods of approximation and consequently have two different definitions. It will be argued that a received view on the relationship between history and sociology (or rather the social sciences) regulates definitional activities on both sides. However, although they share the same theoretical view they emphasise adverse positions within it. It is believed that the aims of the social-scientific approach can best be reached using an alternative theoretical basis, that of an interdisciplinary approach.

2 HISTORY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

2.1 An antithesis no logical necessity
In defining the social-scientific approach to understanding the New Testament, scholars over a broad spectrum accept a traditional antithetical relationship between history and the social sciences. Rohrbaugh says that

it has become a commonplace to say that sociology is a generalizing discipline while history searches out that which is unique and particular....The two disciplines are designed to answer different sorts of questions, and therefore may complement each other so long as we appreciate each for what it is and do not ask either to do the service of the other. (1987:24)

Scroggs (1980:165-166) says that 'the sociology of early Christianity is no attempt to limit reductionistically the reality of Christianity to social dynamic; rather it should be seen as an effort to guard against a reductionism from the other extreme, a limitation of the reality of Christianity to an inner-spiritual, or objective-cognitive system. In short, "sociology of early Christianity wants to put body and soul together again"' (double inverted commas mine). If we want to understand the "soul" of early Christianity, Holmberg explains, 'we must find the "body" it lived as' (1990:3).
Elliott helps us with the sort of questions each discipline asks: "Historians inquire as to who, what, whence, where, and when information. Social scientists investigate the hows, whys, and wherefores" (1990b:11). While the social sciences are based upon models of how the world of human interaction works and why it works that way, history seeks to explain events in terms of the distinctiveness of agents and agencies, thus in terms of particularities and differences (see Malina 1983a:15). Two historians, Burke and Barraclough, serve as authority for the theoretical distinction between the social historian's and the social scientist's approaches (see Malina 1983a:24 n 16; 1985:346 and 1986c:174).

Rohrbaugh who shares the same sentiment, says that the relationship is presented as 'Peter Burke has defined them' (Rohrbaugh 1987:24). There is, however, a significant difference, for Burke says: 'Sociology may be defined as the study of human society, with the emphasis on generalising about its structure. History may be defined [italics mine] as the study of human societies, with the emphasis on the differences between them and on the changes which have taken place in each one over time' (1980:13).

Rohrbaugh quoting these words of Burke, says 'sociology is...while history is' (italics mine). Similarly Esler, echoing these words of Burke, maintains that the historical method, 'as is becoming more widely appreciated, is directed to the particular, the unique and the unusual' (1987:4).

The impression is created that an antithesis between history and the social sciences is today widely accepted as the final theoretical position. This arises from on the one hand an unfortunate appeal to scholars who do not support the view for neither Burke nor Barraclough would accept that position, and on the other hand, a statement of fact, as if there are no choice in how to understand the relationship between history and the social sciences.

To start with Esler's reliance on Burke. He cites from Burke, but incorrectly attributes the viewpoint of an antithesis between history and the social sciences to him. The sentence preceding the quotation from Burke (see above) reads: 'Traditional historians have often objected to borrowing from sociology on the grounds that the two disciplines have opposite aims'. The subsequent sentence reads: 'To this classic objection there is an equally classic answer' (Burke 1980:33). After giving the classic answer, Burke concludes: 'In other words, the historical and the sociological approaches are both complementary and dependent on one another, and both necessarily involve the comparative method' (33). The aim of his study, Burke says, is to encourage the synthesis of two approaches which have been separated and set apart as conflicting approaches (see 30). His study is an argument against the "what-went-wrong?" story (30) of the supposed split between sociology and history and does not as Rohrbaugh and Malina quote him argue in favour of the antithesis.

Neither does Barraclough accept the antithesis. He certainly writes that in practice there are two main differences between the historian and social scientist — the words Malina quotes in support of the antithesis (see 1985:346 and 1986c:174). However, he says in the very next sentence that it is against this background in practice that the contribution of
sociology and anthropology in historical studies must be evaluated. Consid­ering the ways in which the social sciences affect the attitudes and pre­suppositions of historians, Barraclough says 'there is no doubt that the first and the most general result was a major shift of focus, from the particular to the general, from events to uniformities, and from narrative to analysis' (1978:51).

Similar to Burke he starts his book with a discussion of the what-went­wrong story in history (1978:1-28; and see :46). Since 1955 there has emerged a tendency in historical studies which is a general repudiation of the presuppositions of previous generations; 'the main feature of the current trends is the alignment of history, so long regarded as their anti­thesis, with the social sciences' (:43). Practically no historian today, Barraclough says (:43), 'unless he is a self-proclaimed survivor from an older generation' would question the affiliation between history and the social sciences, the impact of which is clearly spelled out by Barraclough (see :53-64).

It should be said that scholars from the other school, such as Malherbe and Hock, who share the antithesis but on the other side of the spectrum, do so tacitly. Their position will become clear when the definition and character of the social-scientific approach is discussed.

To be sure, it is not denied that the view, shared by New Testament scholars, of an antithetical relationship between history and the social sciences really exists, nor that it might today still be the view shared by the majority of historians and social scientists (see Jones 1976:299­300; Barraclough 1978:90; Tosh 1984:128). The antithesis is, however, neither a logical necessity imposed by the material – it is a voluntary choice by the scientist (see Barraclough 1978:41) – nor the only viable position. The developments within history and sociology have opened up other options. The emergence of an interdisciplinary approach of which historical sociology and the new history – of which both Burke and Barra­clough are advocates – are symptoms, arguably has more potential to reduce anachronistic and ethnocentric interpretations.

2.2 The rise of historical sociology and a new history: Glimpses of the development of an interdisciplinary approach

The separation of sociology and history as separate academic disciplines goes back to the previous century. The fact that the discipline of the historian was professionalised only in the nineteenth century and the accompanying role the historian started to play in promoting national and political ideals, cannot, according to Burke, be overemphasised in the search for reasons for the separation (see 1980:18-19). The subsequent emergence of the other social sciences as distinct academic disciplines (between 1870-1930) caused history and the social sciences to move further and further apart (see Stone 1977:7-10; Evans-Pritchard 1961:1; Barra­clough 1978:46). 'History became more and more myopic and inward­turned, and the social sciences became more and more ahistorical' (Stone 1977:10).

Many decades of separation between sociology and history and between history and anthropology have convinced us that they are different in nature. However, many historians and sociologists today admit that at bottom line they really are the same (see Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:1; Burke 1980:13, 26; Abrams 1980:5, 1982:xiii; Barraclough 1978:45-6; Joynt &

Prior to the 1970s the phrase historical sociology was not often heard in conversations among sociologists in the United States (see Skocpol 1984a:356). However by the mid-1980s she argues, 'historical sociology is no longer exclusively the province of the odd, if honored, grand older men of the discipline' (1984a:357). As a matter of fact, Knapp says that at present there is a vigorous growth of historical sociology (see 1984a:357). For the greatest part of this century the dominance of structural functionalism in the social sciences was mainly responsible for the 'partial eclipse of historical sociology' (see Skocpol 1984b:2-5; Burke 1980:19-23).

The new history was the result of the upheaval in historical studies in the past few decades (see Stone 1977:20; Iggers 1983:271). It is a movement away from the narration and explanation of essentially political events (see Pirenne 1959:96) where the emphasis is mainly on politics, the individual, and chronology (see Burke 1980:25-26; Stone 1977:20-21) to a 'problem-oriented, analytic approach' (Iggers 1983:279). With the help of the social sciences it has become possible not only to describe, but also to 'structure and explain historical data' (Kocka 1980:426). Not only the what and how questions, but also the why questions are addressed (see Stone 1977:20, Iggers 1984:183) where analytical methods developed in the social sciences are used to 'find some formula, some hypothesis, some model, some method which has immediate relevance to one's own work, and which seems to help one to understand one's data better and to arrange and interpret them in a more meaningful way' (Stone 1977:19).5

Although there is a growing community of interdisciplinary historically oriented social scientists, the accepted division of labour between history and the social sciences is maintained (see Skocpol 1984a:359; Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:3; Stone 1977:28). While the social sciences are moving towards a recognition of their indissoluble character (see Barraclough 1978:52; Burke 1985:907) what is happening in most cases is the addition of two more disciplines in which one finds historically-informed sociologists (historical sociology) and sociologically-informed historians (new history) (see Jones 1976:295; Abrams 1971; Rothman 1971).6

4 According to Skocpol historical sociology is better understood as a continuing, ever-renewed tradition of research devoted to understanding the nature and effects of large-scale structures and fundamental processes of change. Compelling desires to answer historically grounded questions, not classical theoretical paradigms, are the driving force (1984b:4).

5 For the impact of this movement on current historical studies several good surveys have been made (see Burke 1980:23-30; Stone 1977:3-15; Iggers 1983, 1984; Barraclough 1978:1-45; Tosh 1984:78-92).

6 Burke suggests that it may well be that 'the raison d'être, or social function, of such a division has disappeared; the division has nevertheless become a social fact' (1985:908). One way, he proposes, the dilemma can be solved would be to start with 'adjectival history' where the merging of history, sociology, anthropology, and the other social sciences are much more promising.
Parallel developments have taken place not only in sociology and history but also in anthropology, political science, literary studies, studies in art, in short in all human sciences (see Marcus & Fischer 1986:7; Geertz 1980:165-167). Scholars who start from the what-went-wrong position in the development between history and the social sciences also have a tendency not to try a reconstitution but a reconceptualisation of the disciplines, or rather of the social sciences, as an interdisciplinary activity (see Rabinow & Sullivan 1979:1-21). What is at stake is a redrawing of the intellectual map (see Jones 1976:304), even an alteration of the principles of mapping (Geertz 1980:166). My concern at the moment is the new wine, and not so much what is happening to the old wine skins; what general presuppositions and agreed theoretical principles have distilled from the merging process between history and the social sciences and not what should happen to the existing and emerging academic disciplines.

2.3 Some concluding remarks
In terms of the traditional antithesis between history and the social sciences and the different attempts to rectify the situation, at least five distinct positions can be identified. They are (1) traditional historical and (2) sociology studies indifferent to each other, (3) historically-informed sociologists or historical sociology, (4) sociologically-informed historians or the new history, and (5) a movement towards interdisciplinary research which transcends disciplinary boundaries. Taking these developments into account, isn't it time for New Testament scholars, in defining their social-scientific activities, to abandon the either-or view of history and social sciences? The possibility of neglecting or ignoring social theory and models as well as the possibility of overlooking historical change should to my mind be avoided, already in the philosophical choice made and the methodological principles applied.

3 NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARS AND THE CHARACTER OF THE SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACH
A philosophical choice on the relationship between history and sociology which sees them as not only distinct but even antithetical disciplines, constantly appears in definitional activities. Consequently it is maintained that the social-scientific approach is in nature different and distinct from social description and social history. Perhaps the definitional agenda of the social-scientific approach is too much determined by the received view of an antithesis between history and the social sciences as well as an ignorance or neglect of the role that antithesis plays in defining the approach. At least three different moulds, the result of three different philosophical views on the relationship between history and the social sciences, shape definitions and consequently influence conceptual and terminological aspects.

3.1 Three moulds, three definitions
The social-scientific approach to the New Testament not only reacted to theologically oriented research, which failed to realise that theological ideas are socially and culturally determined, but also to traditional studies of social history (see Elliott 1990b:1; Malina 1986b:150). New
Testament scholarship is saturated by social descriptions or social histories which assume that the concept social is an innocent, neutral concept void of theory and models (see Meeks 1983:1-5; Holmberg 1990:2-3). They are very much inclined to tacitly assume that texts are read without them being subject to or even implicitly informed by theoretical concepts or social theory. Two examples of recent attempts using this mould are that of Hock (1980) and Stambaugh and Balch (1986). Although they claim to write a social history (see Stambaugh & Balch 1986) or attempt a social description (see Hock 1980:16) it is nothing other than what not only historians suspect of theory, (see Tosh 1984:82-83, 127ff; Barraclough 1978:90), but also many New Testament scholars interested in social history have been doing (see Richter 1984:78-79; Domeris 1988:379-380; Kee 1989:32-37). Concepts such as class, status, cults, society, city, social context to name only a few, are used without any reference to social theory. Commensurability with the modern use of the concepts is simply assumed for ancient societies.

Malherbe for example maintains that

Sociological description of early Christianity can concentrate either on social facts or on sociological theory as a means of describing the 'sacred cosmos' or 'symbolic universe' of early Christian communities. Even though new historical information may be assimilated within old paradigms, we should strive to know as much as possible about the actual social circumstances of those communities before venturing theoretical descriptions or explanations of them.

(1983:20)

The fact of the matter, as is emphatically argued by sociologically minded scholars, is that it is impossible to know 'as much as possible' without some theory or model which accompanies one's attempts. All exegetes use models, either explicitly or implicitly (see Rohrbough 1987:23).

Strictly speaking the above studies can hardly be referred to as social-scientific; just as one would hardly refer to traditional historians, hostile to social theory, as social scientists. Thus, they will be referred to as historically minded, or if one forgives their implicit use of social models, social-historical scholars.

The second mould, equally inspired by the history-sociology antithesis, although they explicitly opt for the sociological side of it (see 2.1), is used by sociologically minded scholars. In distinguishing two levels of application of social categories to the New Testament, Best expresses perhaps the majority view in the social-scientific approach. Although both levels are cited as sociological study of the texts, he maintains that 'only the second represents a true "sociological" approach' (1983:185). The first is on the level of social description but for 'a truly sociological approach, however, one must move to the second level, that of explanation' (:185). The tools and techniques of modern sociological models are used here 'not merely to describe but also to probe the inner dynamics of the early Christian movement' (:185). The same view is shared by Elliott who says that contrary to social history, social-scientific interpretation 'advances beyond mere social description and inspired hunches concerning social relationships to social-scientific analysis and explanation'
(1990a:6). He, for example, describes the work of Meeks as an exercise in social description or social history (see 1985:329; 1983:xv) while his own and some others' are social-scientific. He claims that the time has arrived 'for moving beyond social description to sociological analysis' (1990b:2).

The third mould to be identified can best be described as that used by the sociologically-informed historian, or the new history which has emerged from the interaction between history and the social sciences.

For Meeks, at least in principle, social history or social description (concepts used synonymously by him) functions within the realm of the new history. He sees the task of the social historian of early Christianity as that of describing the life of the ordinary Christian within the environment in which the movement was born (see 1983:2). Social description in his view includes the explicit use of social-scientific models for explanation and understanding since he rejects the anachronism of both sides of the traditional separation between history and the social sciences. The use of grand theory as in many sociological studies as well as the rejection or neglect of theory as in many historical studies are equally prone to anachronism. He says that to 'collect facts without any theory too often means to substitute for theory our putative common sense. Making that substitution modernizes no less than does the scientist who follows his theory, for our common sense, too, is a cultural artifact' (1983:5).

Whether he has succeeded in avoiding both the Scylla of imposing grand theory without historical control and the Charybdis of providing historical construction without explicit theory is a question of practice and not of principle. Much of the criticism against him of insufficient or implicit theory may well be justified (see Tiryakian 1985:1139; Malina 1985:347; Elliott 1985:332, 334; Stowers 1985:168-176). That, however, does not negate the fact that his understanding of social history or social description is something different from what some of his critics understand by the concept. This conceptual (and theoretical) issue will again be considered in a subsequent section.

If one thing is beginning to crystallise, it is that for the most part the definitional agenda of the social-scientific approach is currently very much determined by the antithesis between history and the social sciences. As White (1986:249) asks, 'do we approach the case or material

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7 The discussion focuses primarily on what scholars say they are doing and not necessarily what they are doing. Elliott for example explicitly chooses for an antithetical view between history and the social sciences and for a distinction between social-scientific interpretation and social description or social history. However, such neat distinctions are often very difficult to detect in some of his studies in which he gets down to the nitty-gritty task of interpretation.

8 In the words of Tiryakian: 'He [Meeks] draws heuristic concepts from sociology (and social anthropology) to provide an accounting of the Pauline social world; his interpretation of well-known religious texts (the Acts and Paul's Epistles) is thus a certain sociological hermeneutics' (1985:1139).
under scrutiny first as sociologists or as historians?'. The point can be pressed a step further. Are New Testament scholars always aware whether the material is approached historically or sociologically and if so, what kind of history or sociology is involved? In order to avoid the deficiencies of the current moulds a fourth mould will be suggested which arguably has more potential to reduce anachronistic and ethnocentric interpretations. Before that is done, the real and assumed differences between social-scientific interpretation and social description should be analysed.

3.2 Social description and social-scientific explanation: What is the difference?

It should at the outset be said that the distinction between social description and social-scientific explanation per se is not in dispute. However, what is meant by such a distinction is fundamentally determined by one's philosophical view about what history and the social sciences are and what the relationship between them is. As will become clear, the imprecise way in which the two concepts are distinguished and the ignorance about the different meanings in different philosophical moulds are in dispute.

3.2.1 In search of appropriate conceptual distinctions

Historians understand the term social history in at least four distinct ways (see Tosh 1984:82-85). Three ways, which have close resemblances, are used in the traditional sense where history and sociology are seen as antithetical disciplines (social historya) and the fourth in the sense of the new history (social historyb). The way the historical sociologist uses the term (social historyc) is closer to that of the latter group as will become evident when description versus explanation is discussed. The first two ways of understanding the term (social historya and social historyb) will be dealt with here.

It is intelligible that the first attempts at defining the social-scientific (at that stage often referred to as sociological) interpretation were very much influenced by the practice of social historya as it was known in New Testament research. The emphasis in the initial definitions of the approach on the use of models and the fact that all exegetes use them are meaningful. Gager for instance defines the social-scientific approach as in opposition to social historya and bases the distinction between them on the use or absence of social-scientific methodologies (see 1982:258). When Elliott says that contrary to social history, social-

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9 In order to avoid the repetition of words the two concepts 'social description' and 'social history' will be treated as synonyms and be referred to as 'social history'.

10 Although he distinguishes between sociological and proto-sociological approaches, Richter's demarcation principle is basically the same, namely 'the use of explanatory theories and hypotheses of the academic discipline of sociology' (1984:78). In proto-sociological approaches there are only 'tacit assumptions of a quasi-theoretical nature involved' (178). It, how-
scientific interpretation 'advances beyond mere social description and inspired hunches concerning social relationships to social-scientific analysis and explanation' (1990a:6), he expresses the same conviction. To be sure, the criterion to distinguish between them in this instance is the use of social-scientific theories and models in some studies while not in others. The implication is that social historians merely describe, without the use of models, while the social-scientific approach explains by means of social science models. This group can be seen as representing definition set one: social-scientific interpretation and social history.

However, there is a growing tendency among some scholars to define the social-scientific approach as in opposition to social history without realising that the concepts social history and social description have more than one meaning, pending on one's theoretical mould. The problem in short is that the different meanings or uses of the concept social history are either ignored or neglected. Confusion of concepts on at least two levels gives an indication of this disease: the classification of studies as either social-scientific or as social history, and secondly, interpretation of the text and the world is wrongfully attributed respectively to social-scientific interpretation and to social history.

The result is that a second set of definitions of social-scientific interpretation and social history comes into use while advocates for the first set are called on for authoritative support. Confusion is extended in that these two sets are mixed up and arguments for the one is used in support of the other. My point is that a distinction between social-scientific interpretation and social history do not justify one between social-scientific interpretation and social history. A few examples will furnish proof of the differences between the two sets.

3.2.2 Description which fails the test

The very first symptom of the disease is the existence of different definitions and the mixing of categories in the classification of particular studies. The study of Meeks (1983) is a case in point. Some see it as social history (see Malina 1985:346; Domeris 1988:379; Elliott 1983:xv) ever, only 'an essential part of the prolegomena of sociological analysis' (81).


Although Moxnes (see 1988:150) is an exception in this regard, he does not identify all possible positions, nor does he reflect on the underlying differences.

It has already been argued that Malina unjustly quotes Barraclough in support of an antithetical relationship between history and the social sciences (see 2.1). It should, however, be noted that he makes a second mistake in quoting Barraclough to describe Meeks' position as that of a social historian. Although Malina refers to social history as it developed since about 1950 he incorrectly calls on Barraclough to describe
while Meeks himself together with some other critics see it as social history (see Harris 1984:110; Tiryakian 1985:1139; Gallagher 1984:92). The difference between scholars such as Hock, and Stambaugh and Balch, on the one hand, and Meeks on the other, exemplifies the problem. Meeks (social history) not only emphatically argues for the use of social-scientific models, he indeed uses a variety of them quite explicitly, and he emphasizes the unavoidability of using models (see 1983:4-5). The explicit use of models is simply ignored by Hock and Stambaugh and Balch (social history). In terms of philosophical positions on history and sociology Meeks would be closer to new history while the others would be closer to traditional historically minded scholars.

A second example of the disease, the discussion of the social level of the first Christians, indicates how this distinction carries its own penalty for its practitioners. That question, Holmberg says, belongs 'mainly in the field of social description....It can therefore be termed a proto-sociological question' (1990:21). However, is it true to say that Rohrbaugh's discussion on the social class status of the early Christians is proto-sociological because it does not require much use of sociological theory, and in itself entails no attempt at sociological explanation? Holmberg admits, 'Rohrbaugh makes a careful analysis of social class theory' (1990:70). After his analysis of the models and theories and of the first century world, Rohrbaugh concludes 'that a broadly defined understanding of social class as a politico-economic power-group will best serve the needs of the New Testament scholar' (1983:542). He indeed explains (sociologically) the political and economic basis of the class system and indicates the difference to modern western society (see 1983:540-542).

Without going into detail, philosophically Rohrbaugh's study is an example of social history or social history where social-scientific models and methodology are used historically to understand the first century world. Thus, a social historical investigation in the sense of either new history or historical sociology. To my mind current definitions of the social-scientific approach fail to do justice to such studies because they

that view of history. Barracough says that (traditional) historians, and not new historians, differ from social scientists in two ways (see 1978:49-50). Malina quotes him as if he were describing the position of 'social historians' (1985:346). Social historians differ from traditional historians in their view on the relationship with the social sciences as well as in their explicit application of social-scientific models and theories. Malina simply ignores the different positions. While he pretends that Meeks falls into the category of social history, he describes it as social history.

14 Elliott seems to be sitting on two chairs. He refers to this study in the same breath as that of Hoch as social description (see 1983:xv). However, in a review article where he refers to the 'methodological vacillation [sic] between social description and sociological explanation', he recognises that it shares the aims of the social-scientific approach (see 1985:329, 334).
fail to distinguish between on the one hand social history\(^a\) and on the other hand social history\(^b\) and social history\(^c\). They are not clear on the existence and influence of different philosophical moulds which inform and control definitions.

3.2.3 New Testament texts and the New Testament world

There is also a tendency by some scholars to connect studies on social history predominantly to the New Testament world and that on social-scientific interpretation to New Testament texts. Only the latter is seen as being informed by models and theories of the social sciences. The result is that the social-scientific approach is very narrowly considered as an approach meant only for New Testament texts. This happens when the antithetical relationship between history and the social sciences plays a too prominent role in the definition — social history\(^b\) is consequently seen as interested in the world of the New Testament.

Osiek (see 1984:4), when she distinguishes between the terms social and sociological, says that actually we are dealing not with one approach but with two. The distinction she says is between on the one hand a 'social description and analysis, using the findings of archaeology (excavations, art, inscriptions, coins), history, and literature contemporary to the texts' and on the other hand 'the application of social science theory to New Testament texts' (1984:4). Similarly Van Staden states that 'a definite distinction should be maintained between approaches concentrating on constructing a social history from and for the text, and approaches that wish to analyse the text by means of the methods and models developed in the social sciences (1990:63; and see Domeris 1988:379-380).

Social history is wrongfully connected to the study of the New Testament world (where models are not used or only become necessary at a later stage) and social-scientific explanation to the text as if social-scientific interpretation is not done in terms of the socio-historical context and as if all social historians are skeptical of using social-scientific models. Social history is seen as only preliminary and useful for true social-scientific study since it does not utilise social-scientific methodologies. Put bluntly, only studies which explain New Testament texts (by means of models) are seen as social-scientific.

Elliott is right in observing the two possible foci of the social-scientific approach, the one focusing on the 'social conditions, features, and contours of early Christianity and its social environment' (1990b:5) and the other directed primarily at the interpretation of texts. In this view studies on both the first century world and texts can be equally social-scientific or the opposite. Thus the definition is not determined by a distinction in subject matter or research objective but by a philosophical and theoretical (theory of science) point of departure as regards history and the social sciences.

It would be no exaggeration to say that whenever the different moulds which underlie different sets of definitions are not acknowledged, confusion inevitably follows. Secondly that the antithesis between history and the social sciences plays too powerful a role in defining the social-scientific approach. Whether this arises from ignorance or negligence the results are the same. By recognising the different moulds which inform definitions it is possible to be more precise on both definitions and
categorisation. If one's aim is to reduce ethnocentric and anachronistic interpretations, my suggestion is that the initial urge to separate the social-scientific approach from *social history* should be abandoned as major criterion in defining the approach. Instead the interpretive and methodological principles of an interdisciplinary approach should direct and determine definitional activities.

### 3.3 Roots for an alternative mould: interdisciplinary research

A social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament cannot go untouched by what is happening in other fields of research, especially not the philosophy of science developments which have been taking place in history and the social sciences. The roots of the alternative mould for defining the social-scientific approach, which is to be explored in this study, can already be found in the remarks of Gager. In a review essay in 1975, Smith distinguishes four possible approaches to what he calls a 'social description' of early Christianity. It is however Gager who proclaims that only the fourth can be properly characterized as sociological or, more broadly, social-scientific, for it is only here that specific academic disciplines — sociology, anthropology, and psychology — have contributed explanatory theories and hypotheses. The first three approaches are concerned with social aspects of human behavior but they do not require social scientific methodologies to be carried out.

(1982:258)

In his distinction between social-scientific interpretation and social history (see also 1983:429), Gager's argument reflects the traditional position in New Testament studies of an antithesis between history and the social sciences. The many New Testament studies he refers to mostly stand in the mould of *social history*. Apparently Gager stands with his feet in two worlds since his theoretical discussion rather reflects an interdisciplinary position. He warns that there is no principle of hierarchy among the four categories and that theoretical explanations without thorough descriptions are doomed to failure from the start. Conversely, however, I must also state my view that meaningful descriptions can never be devoid of assumptions, whether explicit or not, that verge on being theories in disguise. Thus when I speak of *social description* as distinct from *sociological inter-

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15 They are: (1) 'a description of the social facts given in early Christian materials, ie the realia which they contain' (1975:19); (2) 'the achievement of a genuine social history of early Christianity' (1975:19); (3) studies of 'the social organization of early Christianity in terms of both the social forces which led to the rise of Christianity and the social institutions of early Christianity' (1975:20); and (4) studies 'most consonant with contemporary social theory: early Christianity as a social world, as the creation of a world of meaning which provided a plausibility structure for those who chose to inhabit it' (1975:21).
pretation I do so only to highlight different aspects of a single task [emphasis mine], not to propose that one can proceed without the other. Explanation without description is vacuous. Description without implicit theory is impossible.

(1982:259)

In principle Gager does not distinguish two approaches but two tasks of the same approach. The conceptual and terminological ambiguity may be due to the fact that his theoretical view reveals an interdisciplinary approach while his classification of scholarly works mostly reflects the traditional position that social-scientific interpretation originated in reaction to social history. There is an important difference between on the one hand, two separate approaches which complement each other or where the one builds on the other, and on the other hand, two sides of the same approach, an interdisciplinary approach.

4 A SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACH: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITY OF HISTORICALLY ORIENTED SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

A basic assumption of an interdisciplinary approach is: 'Scientists, social scientists, and historians are all engaged in different branches of the same study: the study of man and his environment, of the effects of man on his environment and of his environment on man' (Carr 1961:86). It represents a philosophy of science position which will not be discussed here in detail. Instead the interpretive and theoretical principles implied by this position will be concentrated on. Suffice it to say that it is widely shared by scholars advocating for an interdisciplinary approach (see Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:1; Burke 1980:13, 26; Abrams 1982:xiii; Barraclough 1978:43-45). It is worth listening to the advice of Stone when he says that 'the solution to an important problem involving real people cannot normally be solved within any one, or even several, of these artificially constructed academic boundaries' (1977:10).

Abrams, a sociologist who advocates a reconceptualisation of history and sociology as historical sociology, best expresses the two poles of the dichotomous character of all social sciences (history included). He says,

In my understanding of history and sociology there can be no relationship between them because, in terms of their fundamental preoccupations, history and sociology are and always have been the same thing. Both seek to understand the puzzle of human agency and both seek to do so in terms of the process of social structuring. Both are impelled to

16 'The two approaches are certainly not antithetical; Indeed, any sociological analysis must build upon the foundation of social historians. But neither are they identical. Each of these tasks is necessary and distinctive' (Gager 1983:429). He is supported by Saldarini who observes that 'the use of descriptive categories, such as class or role, carry with them an (often covert) explanatory theory concerning what aspects of human life and relationships are constitutive and causal for society. Description is never self-sufficient because human understanding demands that we seek explanation' (1988:16).
conceive of that process chronologically; at the end of the debate the
diachrony-synchrony distinction is absurd. Sociology must be concerned
with eventuation, because that is how structuring happens. History
must be theoretical, because that is how structuring is apprehended.

(1982:x)

This whole enterprise hangs on the two concepts structure and change and
the field of assumptions and attitudes which accompany them. What we are
confronted with is the problem of finding a way to account for human expe-
rience and agency 'which recognises simultaneously and in equal measure
that history and society are made by constant and more or less purposeful
individual action and that individual action, however purposeful, is made
by history and society' (Abrams 1982:xiii). This is the story of structure
and change, of active subjects making objects just to become subject to
them, the story of the social construction of knowledge which gives his-
tory and sociology (the social sciences) their common interest (see Berger
Barracough 1978:64; Cohn 1980:217). With these few words on the relation-
ship between history and sociology the parameters are set for discussing
some theoretical principles of a social-scientific approach.

4.1 Unique versus general

Part and parcel of the separation between history and the social sciences
is an age old tradition that 'sociology is nomothetic, history idiogra-
phic' (Erikson 1971:64; and see Jones 1976:300; Wilson 1971:110) — as we
have seen, a position honoured by many New Testament scholars involved in
the social-scientific approach.

At the outset it should be recognised that uniqueness and generality
are not features inherent in facts or events, they are analytical modes of
appraising facts or events (see Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:4); matters of
human perspective and interest (see Joynt & Rescher 1960:151). Thus, every
event has properties that can be subsumed under a general heading (see
Erikson 1971:64), or in terms of history, generalisations are used to
illuminate the particular facts dealt with (see Joynt & Rescher 1960:152;
Carr 1961:63). Without generalisations, either borrowed from the sciences
or from ordinary human experience, the understanding of particular events
would be impossible.

In a certain sense, every particular event is unique (see Joynt &
Rescher 1960:150-151), but if it were wholly unique, no event could ever
be described or explained. In another sense, no event is unique, for as
Evans-Pritchard says, 'there can be no abstraction which is not a genera-
lization as well' (1961:3).

It is true that the historian is 'not a producer of general laws, but a
consumer of them' (Joynt & Rescher 1960:154; and see Kee 1989:38). They
generalise all the time; the very use of language commits the historian to
it (see Hughes 1960:28; Carr 1961:63; Cohn 1980:218; Tosh 1984:133).

17 Hughes distinguishes four planes on which historians, similar to other
social scientists generalise all the time (see 1960:25-26). Especially on
the first three planes, that of semantics, statements about events, and
'schematisation', the procedure of historical generalisation is close to
Sociologists on the other hand, are always dealing with particularities. Evans-Pritchard says that in practice 'social anthropologists today generalize little more than historians do' (1961:2). Actually, social scientists, although their aim is generalisations, are observing unique moments in historical time (see Erikson 1971:64; Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:5; Carr 1961:66).

If historians see no generalities in their data, it is because they do not look for them. A closer acquaintance with the social sciences may however cure the disease (see Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:5). If social scientists do not want to run into 'reductionist, idiographic, or simply descriptive' (Knapp 1984:52) accounts they should realise that they cannot escape from historical embedded theory-making (see Hughes 1960:45-46). In the words of Evans-Pritchard: 'The truth of the matter is this: both sociological historians and social anthropologists are fully aware that any event has the characters of uniqueness and of generality, and that in an interpretation of it both have to be given consideration' (1961:4).

4.2 Explanation and description

Cahnman and Boskoff argue that the dichotomy between description and explanation is helpful neither to the historian nor to the sociologist. They say: '...these processes necessarily are reciprocal in practice. For those who give prominence to analysis and explanation, responsible description, including statistical evidence, is an indispensable base. But the selection of facts for descriptive purposes always presupposes some criteria of relevance which, in turn, are grounded in an explanatory scheme' (1964:3).

An adequate description of evidence is not possible if it is not known what it is evidence for. Stanford (see 1986:60) uses the example of a tourist and a local guide following a wild animal. While the tourist cannot even see the signs on the ground, in other words, he cannot see what the evidence is, the guide can both see the evidence and know what it is evidence for (see also Thompson 1972:53).

Once the character of description is analysed (see Humphreys 1980:2-5), it becomes clear that description is not simply telling the story or revealing what has happened. Chronology is not history, neither is history simply telling a story. In the words of Joynt and Rescher (1960:153; see also Pirenne 1959): 'An historian is not simply interested in dating events and describing them, but in understanding them. And 'understanding' calls for interpretation, classification, and assessment, which can only be attained by grasping the relationship of causal and conceptual interrelations among the chronological particulars'.

that of the social scientist.

18 The distinction between understanding and explanation on a methodological basis and its relationship to description seems to be a false one since explanation includes understanding. Evans-Pritchard for example says 'intelligibility is explanation' (1961:3). Geertz presumably supports it when he says that in an interpretive science, 'the distinction, relative in any case, that appears in the experimental or observational sciences...
Kee reminds us that the historian cannot rest content with the social description of such phenomena as economic factors, archeological remains, social patterns, institutional forms, or even literary evidence in and of itself....Unless this analytical approach is undertaken, it is virtually certain that the unconscious assumptions and values of the interpreter will be imposed on the ancient evidence.

(1989:53)

4.3 History and the social sciences: dialogue rather than dichotomy
Basically, 'all social science is comparative' (Lipset 1968:33; and see Cohn 1980:216) and no serious question about the contemporary world or human activities — past and present — can be asked without receiving historical answers (see Abrams 1982:1-2; Taylor 1977:130). Historians are forced to make their hitherto unspoken assumptions more explicit and use their concepts with more precision (see Stone 1977:15-16; Humphreys 1980:17; Burke 1980:35-37; Barraclough 1978:58-59). Social scientists, using social-scientific models in a comparative perspective, face an enormous task since 'what the sociologist hopes to gain must be reluctantly paid for in the coin of the historian and the anthropologist' (Wilson 1973:18). What we are beginning to see in the social sciences, according to Burke, are attempts which are concerned with 'both understanding from within and explanation from without' (1980:30). It is a rigorous combination of the sociologist's acute sense of structure and generalities with the historian's sharp sense of change and uniqueness. Attempts which take the two-sidedness — human beings as creators and creatures, makers and prisoners — seriously.

The aim of reducing anachronistic and ethnocentric interpretations can to my mind best be realized by a social-scientific approach which is defined not in terms of a dichotomy between history and the social sciences but of dialogue and co-operation. That is so because both fields are concerned with text and context, structure and change, in one word, with otherness. Other's meaningful lives can only be grasped within the context of those lives (see Cohn 1980:198-201). If all social sciences, including history, are historical, and concerned to study man in association and confrontation with others, and are comparative, then they pursue this objective by whatever set of models is suitable for the purpose (see Cahnman & Boskoff 1964:2). The distinction between social description and explanation can thus be maintained. Not as methodologically different activities but as social-scientific activities dealing with different
research problems and objectives.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

A short summary can conclude the argument (see also 'Addendum - Table I'). Traditional historians tend, unconsciously and implicitly, to transfer the categories and concepts of their society onto the first century world. Scholars at the other end of the antithesis between history and sociology can just as easily run into anachronism in that they transfer modern sociological or social-scientific models onto that world. Both the new history and historical sociology, which originated in reaction to the one-sided views in respectively history and sociology, provide us with glimpses at an interdisciplinary mould. As was said, they are however bound by academic and other conventions which force them not to violate the boundaries of their disciplines. As New Testament scholars we are, however, not bound by that. We are in a position to take the interdisciplinary approach as role model. Defining the social-scientific approach on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach will indeed have significant influences on many levels. Social-scientific description and social-scientific explanation would then be distinguished as different tasks in order to understand the first century world and the texts as products of that world. However, a neat and clean distinction seems not possible any more. In practice it means that the social-scientific approach can consist of different tasks which are all conducted by means of the same epistemological and theoretical principles.

Addendum - Table I

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE</th>
<th>HISTORY &amp; SOCIOLOGY</th>
<th>SOCIAL HISTORY MODELS</th>
<th>EVIDENCE</th>
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<td>Opposites</td>
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<td>SOCIOLOGY</td>
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19 The use of social-scientific models and the methodological issues involved in such an interdisciplinary approach is a subject on its own. In a second study I have addressed some of them (see 1990). The argument in short is that not the use of social-scientific models as such, nor even so-called cross-cultural models, but the way they are used can reduce anachronistic and ethnocentric interpretation. At issue is the epistemological foundation, theoretical articulation, and methodological implementation of social-scientific methods and theories. When a model does not function as a procrustean bed to shape the data and when the ideal to determine as clearly as possible what the natives or actors are up to is valued, the possibility of reducing anachronistic interpretations is higher.
**ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE** | **HISTORY & SOCIOLOGY** | **SOCIAL HISTORY** | **MODELS** | **EVIDENCE**
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY | Dialogue | Social history<sup>c</sup> | Aware of historical contingency of models | Model building are historically anchored
NEW HISTORY | Dialogue | Social history<sup>b</sup> | Aware that models cannot be avoided | Models create data
INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH | Transcends disciplinary boundaries | Research objective and not method determines what it is | Models and historical evidence in interpretive dialogue | Data and model in interpretive dialogue

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