

'The Harvard Pareto Circle Revisited'
Joel Isaac

Introduction

The Harvard “Pareto circle” occupies a peculiar position in the history of modern social thought. On the one hand, the band of Harvard University students and faculty members that embraced Pareto’s *Trattato di Sociologia Generale* for a relatively brief moment in the 1930s is frequently identified as the source of several, usually conservative, traditions of inquiry in the American social sciences. The origins of structural-functional sociology, organization theory, industrial psychology, and the history and sociology of science have been traced to the Pareto vogue in Depression-era Cambridge. On the other hand, however, the historical footprint of the circle is by all accounts slight. Even those who credit the Harvard Paretians with considerable feats of ideological innovation point only to desultory examples of their activities in the precincts of Harvard Yard: a seminar here, a letter there. As a consequence, much of the scholarly literature on the Pareto circle concerns itself with tracing lines of influence through a relatively narrow set of published texts. The clinching move of such studies is usually the demonstration that this or that seminal figure—Talcott Parsons, say, or Thomas Kuhn—has deployed a particular concept from the Paretian armoury: “system,” “equilibrium,” “the circulation of elites,” and so on.

In “The Harvard Pareto Circle Revisited,” I call into question this way of thinking about Harvard’s Pareto vogue on two scores. First, I argue that the emphasis upon the political Pareto in much of the existing commentary is misplaced; it was the methodological and ontological dimensions of the *Trattato* that mattered most to Pareto’s most prominent Harvard exegetes. Second, I show that the institutional manifestations of the Pareto circle were actually much more numerous than previously understood. Once we view the Harvard Pareto networks in something like their entirety, a very different interpretation of the Pareto circle comes into view. Philosophically inflected Paretian discourse, I suggest, flourished in the institutional interstices of Harvard University. That observation serves as the basis for a more general hypothesis: the methodological-cum-epistemological register of Pareto talk at Harvard is explicable if we view it as a kind of conceptual *lingua franca* that facilitated interdisciplinary conversations and institutional adjustment. Just *why* and *how* this was so are questions I seek to answer by means of a combination of broad institutional genealogy and close textual analysis. I conclude the paper with the suggestion that there exists an “interstitial canon” of seminal philosophical and methodologically sophisticated works that were either vehicles for, or products of, Harvard’s interstitial subcultures during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

Bibliographical Note

Given the topic of my paper, it may be useful to consult a volume or two of Pareto’s *Trattato*, published in English in 1935 as *The Mind and Society*, trans. Andrew

Bongiorno and Arthur Livingston, 4 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935). The truth is, however, that I am not much interested in Pareto's concepts *per se*. It is the adaptations of the Paretian sociological vocabulary that concern me most. With that in mind, perhaps the best primary text to read is Lawrence J. Henderson, *Pareto's General Sociology: A Physiologist's Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935). I also discuss the following article by the young Parsons in some detail: Talcott Parsons, "Pareto's Central Analytical Scheme" (1936), in *Talcott Parsons: The Early Essays*, ed. Charles Camic (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 133-50. For a bit of local colour and a respectable amount of historical insight into the life of the Pareto circle, see George C. Homans, *Coming to My Senses: The Autobiography of a Sociologist* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1984).

With regard to the secondary literature, my paper is implicitly a sort of rejoinder to—and, if I am convincing, a step beyond—one widely cited article: Barbara S. Heyl, "The Harvard 'Pareto Circle,'" *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 4 (1968): 316-334. Recommended reading is Lawrence T. Nichols, "The Rise of Homans at Harvard: Pareto and the *English Villagers*," in *George C. Homans: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. A. Javier Treviño (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 43-62. For an example of the sort of political reading of the Pareto circle that I am seeking to overturn, see Steve Fuller, *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 163-69. Finally, as an attempt at conducting the history of the human sciences as an inquiry into "local knowledge," my paper is much indebted to Jamie Cohen-Cole, "[Instituting the Science of the Mind: Intellectual Economies and Disciplinary Exchanges at Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies](#)," *British Journal for the History of Science* 40 (December 2007): 567-97 and Hunter Crowther-Heyck, "[Herbert Simon and the GSIA: Building an Interdisciplinary Community](#)," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 42 (Fall 2006): 311-34. These essays set some of the benchmarks against which I ask to be judged. I suspect the contrasts between my paper and theirs also reveals something about the differences between intellectual history (my own field) and the history of science (the profession in which both Cohen-Cole and Crowther-Heyck are trained).

About the Author

Joel Isaac is Lecturer in American History at Queen Mary, University of London. Before taking up his current appointment, he was the Keasbey Research Fellow in American Studies at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He received his PhD from the University of Cambridge and his MA and BA from Royal Holloway, University of London. His essays have been published in *Modern Intellectual History*, the *Historical Journal*, the *European Journal of Social Theory*, and *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. He is currently completing a book about the academic life of philosophy in modern America, provisionally entitled *Conditions of Knowledge: Theory, Philosophy, and the Human Sciences at Harvard University*. He is also co-editing a book on the idea of the Cold War and the historiography of the postwar United States.