Social Science Data and the Metamorphoses of the Political: Production, Interpretation, Communication, and Archiving

Convenors:

Kerstin Brueckweh, Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) and Spokesperson for the AG Sozialdaten und Zeitgeschichte (Social Science Data and Contemporary History Working Group)
Christina von Hodenberg, GHI London and ICAS:MP
Indra Sengupta, GHI London and ICAS:MP
Paul Treffenfeldt, Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)

Call for Papers for the conference organized by the International Centre of Advanced Studies: 'Metamorphoses of the Political' (ICAS:MP) in collaboration with the AG Sozialdaten und Zeitgeschichte at the German Historical Institute London, 22–23 April 2027

The conference will examine the metamorphoses of the political and combine this with an exploration of the production, interpretation, communication, and archiving of social science data. It will bring together two significant strands of research—on the use of social science data for the purposes of contemporary historical research in and on Western Europe on the one hand and knowledge production for state power in colonial India and its significance for the present on the other—in a new and innovative way. The conference will take a broad definition of social science data as its starting point, understanding the term as referring to data collected by private organizations or public institutions that use social science or statistical research methods to describe societies. Particular focus will be placed on quantitative data from official statistics (particularly census data) and non-official statistics, data from market research and other survey research, as well as qualitative data from fields such as ethnography, sociology, and oral history.

Social science data can be of both a qualitative (interviews, field notes) and a quantitative nature. It is always based on established definitions and categories of knowledge that may be more or less suitable for describing the respective subjects of investigation. Although social science data is often perceived as a source with a high degree of factuality due to the purposeful manner in which it is generated, it is always collected on the basis of certain preconceptions and assumptions about the respective societies and phenomena, so these must be critically examined from a historical perspective. Research on colonial knowledge in the British Empire in India, for example, has long shown how categories were created through colonial knowledge projects, such as surveys and the census, dividing the population of India into groups along the lines of racial and ethnic characteristics in order to strengthen the power of the colonial state. Contributions on social science data from colonial or imperial and postcolonial contexts that engage with the specific characteristics of colonial knowledge are therefore particularly welcome.

We welcome contributions on the following topics:

1. Production

What are the particular challenges for the **production** of social science data in times of social, economic, legal, and political change? How are concepts and categories adapted? How does the production of social science data change in relation to a shifting object of study, and how does the methodology employed in the process evolve? How is the production of social science data shaped by specific epistemic standpoints?

2. Interpretation

What opportunities and risks arise when using social science data in a historical perspective, and particularly across historical turning points, in the **interpretation** of socio-political change? How can the production of social science data, which is anchored in specific times and locations, be subjected to appropriate source criticism? How can established historical arguments be recontextualized, re-examined, or challenged through social science data analysis? What new perspectives does this reveal?

3. Communication

Scientific or political statements based on social science data are frequently used to legitimize socially controversial phenomena. Particularly in times of change, they serve as a point of orientation in the socio-political landscape; however, their significance must be critically contextualized. We therefore welcome contributions that examine, from a historical perspective, the **communication** of social data and the findings based on it.

4. Archiving

What needs to be taken into account when **archiving** social data for future researchers? Which epistemic standpoints are privileged in the archiving and anonymization of social data, and how does this reproduce power relations from the period in which the data was generated?

The overarching aim of the conference is to bring together historians from diverse (Indian, German, European, global) contexts with varying perspectives on the subject of social science data and historical research.

Travel Expenses: You will be reimbursed for your travel expenses after the event via bank transfer up to a specified maximum sum in accordance with the Federal Budget Law (Haushaltsrecht) and the Federal Travel Expenses Act (BRKG: Bundesreisekostengesetz) of the German government.

Further information on the type of tickets and travel we can refund will be given at a later date; we will be happy to advise you if you have any questions.

Please submit your proposal (a PDF file consisting of an abstract of no more than 500 words and a one-page CV) by 30 November 2026 to Paul Treffenfeldt (paul.treffenfeldt@leibniz-irs.de).

For questions on content, please contact Indra Sengupta (i.sengupta@ghil.ac.uk) and Paul Treffenfeldt. Please direct any organizational enquiries to Abbie Jemmett (events@ghil.ac.uk)