
Being or Becoming: Commitment in Cold War Social Science

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Résumé

Abstract.- The concept of commitment has achieved a significant presence across US postwar social science, enjoying increased visibility from the mid-1950s. Economists insist that commitment is the result of a decision to bind oneself to a line of action; they use the concept to express the centrality of individual agency even when it comes to eliminating options. Sociologists see it more as a consequence of one's decision being subjected to social structural forces. They resort to the concept to show that engagement in a consistent line of action stems from decisions that are inevitably embedded. These differences notwithstanding, economists and sociologists agree on the nature of the commitment problem—that it is difficult to make and stand by one's decisions in a changing environment. It would be a mistake, however, to account for that convergence only on the basis of external changes associated with the Cold War. Interdisciplinary exchange played an equally important role. As they contributed to the analysis of commitment, Thomas Schelling, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman inevitably built on existing research traditions from their own disciplines, but they also drew from each other's. As they incorporated extradisciplinary insights and transformed them to suit their own disciplinary framework, they tilted the existing balance between personal agency and social structure, as found in economics and sociology, and in so doing helped create a form of knowledge that contributes to a more general understanding of social interactions.

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Mots-Clés: commitment, economics, sociology, personal agency, social structures, social interactions

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