The Development of the Social Sciences

Dorothy Ross

Let me begin by admitting that discussion of the formation of five disciplines—psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology, and political science—within the compass of a single essay and under the rubric of the "social sciences" not only lacks prudence but risks historical anachronism. At the beginning of this period in 1865, these disciplines had little independent existence in America. Although recognized traditions of thought existed in each subject, they were generally the concern of men and women of affairs debating the practical problems of government and education and of gentlemen scholars and clergymen discussing history, morals, philosophy, and natural history—the larger humanistic traditions from which these subjects branched. In American colleges, where religious considerations still controlled faculty and curriculum, many of the topics that later constituted the social sciences were treated within senior courses in moral and mental philosophy.

With the expansion of universities in the 1870s and 1880s, these five subjects began to forge separate intellectual and social identities, but they still lacked a common sense of themselves as branches of social science. Psychologists and anthropologists, for example, often felt more closely allied to biology, and political scientists to history and jurisprudence, than to any other of the five disciplines. It was only after World War I that a more common identity emerged.1

As before and after the 1920s, this common identity was hardly cohesive. The Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the umbrella organization formed in 1923, included history and statistics, disciplines that were linked to the social sciences yet maintained independent roots in other traditions. Even

---
within the core subjects, diversity reigned. Both anthropology and psychology maintained strong ties with the natural sciences. A major part of psychology has never been "social." And if one attempts to find a deeper conceptual unity than the generic tag of sociality, the social sciences appear even more diverse. The focus on culture and its links to personality and social structure, which George Stocking has described as an increasingly pervasive paradigm for the social sciences since the 1920s, has had to share the field with a behavioral viewpoint, more closely linked to biology and to quantitative methods. Indeed today the five disciplines would be better described as "social and behavioral sciences" than by the former term alone. And large segments of these subjects are not essentially related to either the cultural or behavioral viewpoints, but have roots in older systematic traditions.  

If we keep in mind the mixed identities of the social sciences during their formative decades and still today, it is possible without anachronism to discern similarities in the way these five disciplines developed after the Civil War. All of them became separate disciplines. All became firmly established in academic institutions. All underwent a process of professionalization. And all five disciplines attempted to establish themselves as sciences.

The first three of these characteristics the social sciences shared with many other subjects in America during the post–Civil War period. The natural sciences had organized professionally in the American Association for the Advancement of Science before the Civil War. After the war, the natural sciences found new bases of support in the universities and formed separate professional organizations. Before any of the social sciences had organized,  

the formation of the American Philological Society in 1869, the Modern Language Association in 1883, and the American Historical Association in 1884 marked the entry into American colleges and universities of other groups of scholars with professional ideals. Four of the five social science subjects formed their first graduate departments and professional journals in the 1880s, and sociology followed in the early 1890s. Economics was the first to form a national professional association in 1885; psychology followed in 1892; and the others were organized just after the turn of the century—anthropology in 1902, political science in 1903, and sociology in 1905.

To some extent, the humanistic disciplines that emerged in the decades after the Civil War shared the scientific aspirations of the social scientists as well. Philologists and historians were also intent on making their disciplines empirical sciences. By about 1920, however, the social sciences had diverged from these older historical subjects. Social scientists focused their attention on the regularities underlying social phenomena and accepted an ideal of science that stressed objectivity of method and technical manipulation of contemporary social processes.

Several aspects of these developments have been the subject of intense investigation by recent historians. Drawing heavily on this work, as well as on my own, I have outlined below some of the factors that led the social sciences to take form as separate, academic, professional, and scientific disciplines. Part I below identifies a number of groups of scholars concerned with social science during the 1870s and 1880s and discusses the emergence of academic and scientific disciplines in this area. Part II describes the generation of young academics who appeared after 1880 and analyzes their impulse toward professionalization. Finally, part III deals specifically with the scientific aspirations of the social sciences and notes some of the factors that led to the appearance of a more rigorous scientism after 1912.


5. By scientism I mean the belief that the objective methods of the natural sciences should be used in the study of human affairs, and that such methods are the only fruitful ones in the pursuit of knowledge. This formulation leaves open the definitions of "objective methods," "natural science," and "knowledge," which changed over time.
I.

Among social thinkers active in America during the 1870s, those with the longest heritage were the clerical professors of moral and mental philosophy in the American colleges. Since the early nineteenth century, the college curriculum had been organized to culminate in courses in mental and moral philosophy, where aspects of social life were studied as subdivisions of man’s moral behavior in a natural world governed by God. Those subdivisions that rested on subjects already well-developed in British thought, like political economy and philosophical psychology, often became areas of interest and writing for these scholars. The proper principles of political action and the moral bases of social behavior were seldom given extended treatment, and topics later recognized as part of anthropology rarely appeared. Regarding themselves as preservers of the moral heritage of Protestant Christianity, these clerical professors were already fading from view in the 1870s. Their place was being taken by new groups who played a more direct role in the emergence of the social sciences.

One such group were independent scholars and reformers employed in the older professions who began to take an avocational or public interest in social science reform. Such, for example, were Frank B. Sanborn, an author, abolitionist, and leader in the charity-organization movement; George W. Curtis, editor and advocate of civil service reform; and Lester Frank Ward, a government botanist whose cosmic social theory advocated the rational control of social evolution by educated experts. Others, largely self-taught, were already employed by the government in areas related to social science, among them the economist Carroll D. Wright, director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor and later director of the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics; and John Wesley Powell, geologist and ethnologist who founded and directed the Smithsonian’s Bureau of Ethnology from 1880 until his death in 1902.

Except for workers in the area of anthropology, whose chief institutional tie was with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, many advocates of political, social, economic, and educational reform, like Wright, Curtis, and Sanborn, found an institutional locus in the American Social

---

Science Association (ASSA). Modeled on the British National Association for Promotion of Social Science, the ASSA had been founded in 1865 to extend social knowledge and provide a more authoritative basis for dealing with contemporary social problems. Besides reformers and workers in practical social services, the ASSA drew its leadership from two important sections of the New England cultivated elite: natural scientists like Benjamin Peirce and Louis Agassiz, who had been trying for decades to raise the standard of competence in scientific investigation, and university reformers like Charles W. Eliot and Daniel Coit Gilman, who held similar goals for the American colleges and universities.

The ASSA divided its work into four departments: education, public health, social economy, and jurisprudence, a division that reflected both the definition of the older professions of education, medicine, and law and the lack of definition in the “social” category. The ASSA proved to be an important catalyst in the development of a secular social science, as both reformers and a newer generation of academic social scientists temporarily joined its ranks in the 1870s and 1880s. As each group of social investigators defined its problems and its methods more clearly, however, they seceded from the Association. The ASSA has gone down in history as the “mother of associations;” its most permanent function was to provide institutional auspices for the founding of specialized organizations like the National Conference of Charities and Corrections and the American Economic Association.7

For a time, however, the ASSA leadership hoped to remain at the center of social science development. As colleges adopted the elective system, members of the social science movement began to give courses to undergraduates. The courses were oriented toward social problems and took students into the cities and institutions to actually see the “delinquent, defective and dependent classes.” Indeed, such “problems” courses have persisted as a feature of sociology. However, both the colleges and some leaders of the ASSA were reluctant to become too closely identified. From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s rebuke of Harvard’s isolation from the world in 1837 to Wendell Phillips’s in 1881, American colleges had not been conspicuous for their support of reform activities. The expanding universities, with their dependence on the respectable class for students and financial support, were also wary of the social science movement. When some of the ASSA leaders urged the affiliation of

7. On the formation of the ASSA and the history of the social science movement, see Furner, Advocacy and Objectivity, intro., chaps. 1, 2, 13; Thomas L. Haskell, The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Authority (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Bernard and Bernard, Origins, p. 8.
the association with Johns Hopkins University, President Gilman replied that the desire of the ASSA not only to study but to advocate reforms made it incompatible with university education.  

Meanwhile, the separate disciplines that would later constitute the social sciences were making their independent appearance in the colleges under more scholarly auspices. A number of men who had started in the older clerical or public milieu began to devote their full energies to teaching these subjects in the 1870s and to teaching them as independent subjects free from religious constraint. Under pressure from groups of trustees and alumni to introduce modern knowledge into their curricula, the colleges were beginning to make openings for this new group. William James, for example, introduced physiological psychology, and Charles Dunbar, political economy, at Harvard. William Graham Sumner taught sociology at Yale; Francis A. Walker, political economy at Yale’s Sheffield Scientific School; and Andrew D. White introduced political science at Cornell. While the Philadelphia anthropologist Daniel Brinton taught briefly at the University of Pennsylvania, the main anthropological development in the 1870s occurred under Powell at Washington, or in the museums as under Frederic Ward Putnam at Harvard’s Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology.

In each of the five disciplines, the academic pioneers of the 1870s worked within systematic traditions that had been developed abroad and explored in limited ways by their clerical and secular predecessors in America. Except for classical political economy, these systematic traditions were taking form in the 1870s along evolutionary lines: British associationist psychology was being recast on evolutionary, biological assumptions; a universal theory of evolution was taking shape in anthroplogy; in sociology there were positivistic theories of social evolution propounded by Comte and Spencer; and in political science, theories of the historical evolution of Anglo-American political institutions. The American academics were also sometimes alert to still newer developments abroad. William James, for example, incorporated into his thinking some of the new physiology and experimental psychology. In economics, Francis Walker accepted into the classical tradition some insights from German historical economics. Simon Newcomb, an astronomer and mathematician employed in government and at the early Johns Hopkins, quickly took up the idea of marginal utility that was being formulated within the classical tradition and suggested the possibility of developing it in mathematical terms. While some members of the next generation would regard these developments in method and theory as the bases for major re-

8. Haskell, Emergence of Professional Social Science, chap. 7; Furner, Advocacy and Objectivity, pp. 313–20; Ralph W. Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837) and Wendell Phillips, “The Scholar in a Republic” (1881), both delivered as Phi Beta Kappa addresses at Harvard.
orientations of their fields, for the pioneer groups of the 1870s, these developments did not so much challenge the older systematic traditions as extend them.

The new academics tended to define science in the manner common among humanistic subjects earlier in the nineteenth century—as a body of systematic principles resting on empirical evidence. Consistent with this view, the reform purpose of the new sciences was cast in the tradition of general edification. Although influenced by the mounting evidence of conflict in the public arena, the academics of the 1870s were unhurried in their solution. Rational scientific principles would be disseminated in the new courses to the future leaders of society; they would promote reasoned discourse and encourage the adoption of correct practices in the society at large. The desire to train an expert civil service, which motivated some of the early work in political science, and the experience of some economists in advising government and men of affairs on economic questions were half-steps beyond this traditional approach, related both to the concept of public leadership and the newer concept of professional expertise.

Why this new body of interest in the social sciences emerged among reformers and academics in the 1870s is one of the major questions facing historical inquiry. To some extent, the appearance of the social sciences in the 1870s reflected the internal growth of knowledge in each field that had occurred in Europe over the preceding century and that had hitherto been underutilized in America. But it would be difficult to attribute the new attention given these subjects to the state of intellectual development they had reached. The advent of evolutionary concepts is one intellectual development that occurred in several fields at roughly this period. For example, Spencer's evolutionary theories had a galvanizing effect on American sociology, providing perspectives on historical comparative analysis that dramatically increased the sense of scientific identity. Yet sociologists quickly discovered that beneath these broad conceptions, they had no established subject matter and few clues as to how to analyze what subjects they addressed. In psychology, while evolutionary concepts were providing some synthetic perspectives during the 1870s, it is arguable that the physiological psychology and laboratory experimentation developed in Germany were more central to the perception of growth in the field held by its American practitioners and, in this case, provided the core around which the field formed. In economics, evolutionary concepts played virtually no role as yet in America; indeed, classical economics, though far better developed intellectually than sociological theory, was in some quarters on the defensive, and the impact of historical methods and marginal analysis was just beginning to be felt. The fact that these fields all took on similar institutional identities in the 1870s, despite the varying state of momentum, coherence and complexity in their subject matters, sug-
gests the importance of sociocultural factors in the timing of this early crystallization.

The post–Civil War decades were a time of substantial social change resulting from industrialism and the growth of cities, and sociologists have linked these social changes to profound changes in cultural attitudes. That a scientific view of the world is an essential element in the increasingly rational character of modern society has been a fundamental premise of sociological theory since it first emerged in the early nineteenth century. Historians have only recently begun to explore that linkage more carefully and to explain the particular kinds of social scientific explanations that developed in these decades by reference to the particular kinds of sociocultural needs felt at the time.

It is clear, however, that the concatenation of declining religious authority, growing urban problems, and the prolonged depression and labor conflict of the 1870s was beginning to create a sense of crisis among some intellectuals. The people who responded to the call of the ASSA and who sought to develop in the colleges a more worldly and effective kind of knowledge were particularly sensitive to the need for intelligent leadership and social order. Like many of their contemporaries in various fields, the social scientists thought of themselves as members of a social and cultural elite who represented the dominant line of American development; as the heirs of the republican tradition, they sought to assume the moral authority befitting their station. Generally the sons of native Protestant families, they had been taught in college that they constituted an elite of learning and virtue whose leadership American society should follow. Thus they regarded themselves, often quite explicitly, as a natural aristocracy generated by and in some ways identified with the “people,” but yet a class apart. In the general social crisis, the authority of their class was seen as synonymous with intellectual order in the society at large—the assertion of the one being a guarantee of the other.

II.

During the 1870s, the social sciences began to take root as separate, academic, and scientific disciplines. Before we can follow these processes further and examine the professional character these disciplines displayed, we must introduce another and younger group of social scientists who appeared around 1880. The older scholars were educated and certified, if at all, in one of the traditional branches of knowledge. The younger group had received its training, and often Ph.D. degrees, from German universities or from such pioneer American universities as Johns Hopkins.9 It was the younger generation who

---

9. Among the social scientists about whom I have thus far been able to gather data, no one in the traditional generation is born later than 1842 nor holds a Ph.D. degree. The professional
took the lead in establishing the new courses and graduate training programs and who founded the journals and national associations that ultimately defined the new professions.

Within the generation of the 1880s, we can discern two different types of scholars. In most of the disciplinary areas, there were scholars whose attitudes toward science and reform were close to that of the older, traditional generation. Although the traditionalists composed quite substantial groups in all the disciplines, there were also scholars with a different outlook and more militant professional ideals. In economics, the militant group was composed of those trained in German historical economics, like Richard T. Ely of Johns Hopkins. In psychology, it consisted of laboratory scientists trained in the new German physiological psychology, like G. Stanley Hall, founding president of Clark University. In anthropology, Franz Boas of Columbia led a group of allies and students who desired a more historical and critically scientific anthropology. In sociology, Albion W. Small, chairman of the department at Chicago, E. A. Ross of Stanford, and Franklin Giddings of Columbia spearheaded the search for theoretical and professional identity. In political science, a group of scholars oriented toward historical and administrative problems took the lead in establishing professional institutions. The pioneers in the group were John W. Burgess, who introduced political science at Amherst College in the 1870s and at Columbia College in 1880, and Herbert Baxter Adams, who established a department of history and political science at Johns Hopkins. Although enterprising advocates of political studies, Burgess and Adams shared many of the scientific and social attitudes of the older traditional scholars.10

The single most striking similarity in the attitudes of these militant groups was their conception of modern science as a product of empirical investigation. The traditionalists had already felt the influence of the post–Civil War temper of realism, and their successors were even more committed to the turn to facts. Whether from their exposure to German Wissenschaft, then in its most empirical phase, or from the stunning achievement of Darwin in biology, and generally from both, they argued that “real” science or the “newer” science built its theories closely on empirical observation. To some extent, this empirical thrust in the social sciences may have echoed the Baconian empiricism that dominated inquiry in the natural sciences in antebellum America. But many spokesmen attempted to define a more sophisticated position. Those with philosophical inclinations and training, like Franz Boas and G. Stanley Hall, felt the need to link their empirical stance in science to contemporary epistemology. Like William James, they were under the influence of neo-Kantian idealism and worked out an empiricist epistemology that incorporated substantial elements of idealism. In all the social sciences, many spokesmen also drew support for empirical science from a new historical consciousness. If knowledge emerged only from the intimate fusion of mind and object; if social objects changed constantly over time and in complex interaction, only a social science dedicated to close and continuous observation of social objects could hope to understand them.\footnote{On Baconian empiricism, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, \textit{Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought} (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), chaps. 1, 8. On James’s revision of empiricism, see Bruce Kuklick, \textit{The Rise of American Philosophy, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1860–1930} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For a general account of the empirical stance and neo-Kantian and histornicist roots of the militant groups, see Jürgen Herbst, \textit{The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture} (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965); Fritz R. Ringer, \textit{The Decline of the German Mandarins} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 295–315; in relation to psychology, Ross, \textit{G. Stanley Hall}, chaps. 5, 6, 9; in relation to anthropology, Stocking, \textit{Race, Culture and Evolution}, chap. 7. For polemical statements of the militants’ empirical programs, see Richard T. Ely, “The Past and Present of Political Economy,” \textit{Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science}, 2d ser., no. 3 (March 1884); the debate between the historical school and the classical economists in \textit{Science}, reprinted as Henry C. Adams, et al., \textit{Science Economic Discussion} (New York: Science Co., 1886); Ross, \textit{G. Stanley Hall}, chaps. 9, 10, 13; James McKeen Cattell, “Mental Tests and Measurements,” \textit{Mind} 15 (1890): 373–81; “The Progress of Psychology,” \textit{Popular Science Monthly} 43 (1893): 779–85; Boas’s early programmatic statements in \textit{Science} and his address at the St. Louis Congress in 1904; “The History of Anthropology,” reprinted in Stocking, ed., \textit{Shaping of American Anthropology}; Albion Small and George E. Vincent, \textit{An Introduction to the Study of Society} (New York: American Book, 1894); Small, “The Era of Sociology,” pp. 1, 15; idem, “Free Investigation,” pp. 212–13; idem, reviews, pp. 219–28, \textit{AJS} 1; Burgess, “The Study of the Political Sciences in Columbia College,” \textit{International Review} 12 (April 1882): 346–51; “Political Science and History,” \textit{American Historical Review} 2 (April 1897): 401–8.}
Besides their empirical conception of science, the militant groups also generally shared a desire to use their knowledge more directly in the solution of social problems than had their academic precursors. Their sense of urgency undoubtedly arose from the fact that they grew to maturity during the 1870s and 1880s, when industrialization had generated the first major wave of depression and labor violence in America. During that period, the revival of democratic sentiment and the appearance of socialism as an alternative course for modern industrial society accentuated their sense of social crisis. Many of them also came from family backgrounds in which the Protestant evangelical tradition had been a powerful influence. In part the failure to believe literally in Christianity any longer, or the failure to achieve the religious experience some evangelical sects demanded, led them to pour their energy into the fervor for moral betterment. The organic religious values and idealistic worldview of the evangelical social scientists made the social conflict they saw around them particularly painful and led them to seek ways to use their scientific knowledge to restore social harmony.\footnote{Ross, "Socialism and American Liberalism"; A. W. Coats, "Henry Carter Adams: A Case Study in the Emergence of the Social Sciences in the United States, 1850–1900." \textit{Journal of American Studies} 2 (October 1968): 177–97; William R. Hutchison, "Cultural Strain and Protestant Liberalism," \textit{American Historical Review} 75 (April 1971): 386–411; Richard T. Ely, \textit{Ground Under Our Feet}, pp. 16, 65, 72.}

The active reform concern of these scholars was expressed in social values that were generally different from the values of their traditional precursors and contemporaries, in most cases further left on the political spectrum toward greater social equality and governmental responsibility. The conflict in social values was particularly fierce in economics, where the historical economists were influenced by socialism and desired to expand the role of the state in economic activity as a means of moderating the harsh consequences of industrialization. Militants took a more liberal or radical position on such issues as government ownership or regulation of the economy, support of labor unions, labor's claim to a greater share of profits and control of industry, and government welfare legislation. Their overtly ethical conception of economics conflicted sharply with that of the traditionalists, who had been trying to separate their subject from moral philosophy by asserting that economics, as a science, had nothing to do with ethics.

In political science the difference in social values was much less severe than in economics. While the political scientists agreed on the need for a more positive role for the state in modern society, their views occupied a more conservative range on the political spectrum, probably because scholars concerned with pressing social issues of the day naturally gravitated to economics and sociology. Burgess's interest in the state had emerged from Civil War
nationalism and conservative concern for order; in the context of the new economic and social issues, he advocated a limited role for the state as protector of property rights. Most others in the group, and their students who moved into professional leadership at the turn of the century, saw the state as an agent of liberal, stabilizing reform.

In psychology, the conflict in values was again sharply drawn. Far more than their traditional precursors, the new experimental psychologists wanted to divorce themselves altogether from religion and metaphysics and to shift the ground on which moral and existential issues were to be solved. These secular values involved them from the start in conflicts over religious belief and educational practice, with the new psychologists siding generally against the soul and with some form of progressive education.

Thus, during the 1880s many of the new generation of social scientists turned to professionalization. They recognized that professional development—in the form of graduate programs, journals, and national associations—was the means by which they could force entry for their new programs into the American colleges and universities.\(^\text{13}\)

In political science and sociology—as opposed to economics and psychology—the efforts toward professionalization did not result in clear-cut conflicts between militarists and traditionalists. Burgess's program of political science based on history and law was not at first sharply differentiated from the aspirations of a traditional figure like White, or from the study of history. Given his position at the still unreformed Columbia College, Burgess's aggressive professional efforts were initially directed against the conception of the older college and narrow legal training rather than against history per se, which he usurped by appointment. In the course of the 1880s and 1890s, however, the distinctly scientific aims and contemporary statist concern of Burgess's program became more sharply delineated from the historians, while the institutional development Burgess secured at Columbia grew through the efforts of such students as Frank Goodnow into a professional journal and association for the whole discipline.

In sociology, professional organization came late, when the range of political conflict and institutional rivalry had narrowed. The new sociologists quickly found that they had laid claim to the true science of society through the development of professional institutions before they could make good

\(^{13}\) While these social scientists had the components of the concept of professionalization clearly in mind, they sometimes spoke of their aims as being specifically "professional," and other times, reacting to the narrower practical connotations of the term, defined their aims as "non-professional specializations." For an example of the former, see Ely, "American Colleges and German Universities," Harper's New Monthly Magazine 61 (July 1880): 253–60; for the latter, see John W. Burgess, The American University (Boston: Ginn, Heath, 1884), reprinted in idem, Reminiscences, p. 365.
on the promise. Instead of facing a sharp-edged enemy in the traditional camps, the professionalizing sociologists were surrounded by a sea of academic doubters who questioned the substance of their new field.  

The social scientists of the 1880s had to exert their authority not only against other academics but also against popular claimants to science and social usefulness. This second front was not very important where disciplinary expertise was already well developed, as in economics, or where popular practitioners made no claim to science, as in politics. But the new psychologists had to counter popular spiritualists and psychic researchers, and the sociologists tried to displace the growing number of clerical and lay social reformers. For the insecure and amorphous subject of sociology, popular counterclaims were a major threat, particularly since popular reformers often advocated more radical reforms than the academic sociologists could approve. In the 1890s, Small and his colleagues regarded the reformers as their chief competitors, and Small apparently rushed to start his American Journal of Sociology to prevent the formation of a reformist journal for "Christian sociology."  

The conditions and motives behind the professionalizing activity of the 1880s is a major question for historical inquiry. We have seen that the younger militant social scientists had a powerful motive for the formation of professional institutions: they lacked a firm footing in the colleges and educated communities for their new conceptions of social science, and thereby for themselves. But their turn to professionalism also reflected fundamental changes in modern society.

Sociologists and historians have long seen the development of industrialism in the nineteenth century, with its increased specialization of labor, as the seedbed for professionalism. Professionalism can be defined as a form of occupational control, one form among others (guilds, patronage, state regulation) that historically have attempted to regulate the problematical relationship between producer and consumer arising from the specialization of labor. Two aspects of that relationship create the possibility of professionalization. One is the degree of uncertainty in the relationship, which increases with the degree of specialization in production; the other is the potential for autonomy that an occupational group has—the degree to which it can exert its power over the producer-consumer relation. Professionalism is a form of collegial occupa-

---


16. See, for example, Haskell, _Emergence of Professional Social Science_, chaps. 1. 2; Robert Wiebe, _The Search for Order, 1877–1920_ (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), chap. 5.
tional control in which the producer's expert knowledge creates a high degree of uncertainty in the relationship and thus a high need for control, and in which the historically high status of its practitioners and the fragmentation of its consumers has enabled the occupation to press and enforce its claims for collegial autonomy. 17

All the groups of social scientists we have discussed here—the reformers of the ASSA, the academic pioneers of the 1870s, and the younger generation of the 1880s—were subject alike to the underlying process of modernization, and all showed some interest in professional development. As industrialization proceeded and society became more complex, a greater degree of uncertainty entered into the relationship between the producers and consumers of social knowledge, an uncertainty that increased as thinkers and reformers began to propound unfamiliar explanations. In addition, the social base of many of the social scientists in the patrician class or in the genteel professions—and the claim they made to scientific expertise at a time when the authority of science was rising dramatically—augmented the power of the social scientists to enforce their claims to autonomy.

The tempo of professionalizing activities, however, was markedly quickened by the generation of the 1880s and the kind of professionalism they espoused came to dominate their disciplines. There appears to have been at least three professional ideals at work among the early social scientists—that of the practitioner, that of the college-based teacher-scholar, and that of the research-oriented scholar-scientist. If we examine more closely the differing claims to professional status put forward by these early social scientists, we can see why the attitudes of the academics of the 1880s led more directly toward professionalizing activity and why the institutions and norms they established prevailed.

There were a number of groups of practitioners in the area of social science, many of them active in the ASSA, who felt the need to develop expert knowledge, vocational careers, and organizational bases for professional advancement; these included particularly workers in the area of charity and corrections, and government workers in the areas of labor and statistics. Carroll D. Wright is perhaps the best example of such a practitioner who attempted to develop a scientific professional base in government civil service. Had American social science developed in that mold, as it did partially in Britain, it might have fallen heir to the large amount of private funding for

social welfare activities available after 1900 and particularly after 1920. The ASSA, as some academics and practitioners originally contemplated, might then have served as a bridge between expert practitioners and academics, bringing together both theory and practice in the investigation of social problems.  

However, in late-nineteenth-century America, the practical vocations offered limited opportunities for people interested in developing social scientific knowledge. Government service offered very few jobs above a routine level. The Social Gospel, Chautauqua, and urban reform movements that supported some of the early economists, sociologists, and political scientists offered equally meager support for a career, as did the politically influenced and erratically funded public school systems. Only in anthropology did museums and government seem to provide any basis for a sustained career. Moreover, neither charity work nor government service offered the kind of status that could support claims to professional autonomy. The younger social scientists therefore saw more opportunity in the scholarly vocation and semipatrician status of the college professor than in the practical vocations.  

The academic pioneers in social science subjects during the 1870s also had professional goals, but they were already members of a profession, that of college teacher, which had generally been in America a marginal adjunct to the clerical profession. Their professional aims were oriented toward strengthening the traditional conception of the college professor as a teacher and as a member of an elite community. In that multifaceted ideal, competence and scholarship in a special field were important but remained imbedded in duties to the community and the institution that related to personal character and class status. Traditional scholars, like William Graham Sumner and William James, were joined by university reformers based in the ASSA, such as Charles W. Eliot and Andrew D. White, in this desire to establish academic careers for teacher-scholars who could speak with authority to the problems and anxieties of the respectable community.  

Rooted in a long-standing genteel and community-based professional culture, the teacher-scholars believed that their systematic knowledge could be shared with an enlightened public, its principles taught and grasped in classrooms and public journals alike. Thus they felt less strongly the growing uncertainty in the relationship between producers and consumers of social  


knowledge. Moreover, they enjoyed a firm base in their institutional communities through personal, family, or class ties and could hope to strengthen their professional roles through the kinds of alliances with trustees, alumni, journalists, and philanthropic capitalists through which they had already begun to reform the colleges.

Finally, there was the professional ideal the younger social scientists of the 1880s learned chiefly in Germany: that of the university professor whose prime commitment was to the advancement of knowledge in his own discipline. While the example of the flourishing German universities had influenced American intellectuals intermittently throughout the nineteenth century, the social scientists of the 1880s participated in the upsurge of migration to German universities. Many of them, impressed by the scientific success and the relatively high status of German university professors, adopted the German ideal of the research-oriented professor. The first professional institutions the Americans so quickly fashioned, from graduate seminars and Doctor of Philosophy degrees to journals and associations, were adaptations of the institutional framework of their respected German models. These institutions were at once professional and research-oriented. Their research function—to provide the kind of exchange of information and peer review that was necessary to stimulate and monitor advanced scholarship—was itself a collegial exercise of autonomy.

Moreover, in Germany, the younger social scientists studied at first hand the specialized bodies of knowledge that had developed in the universities during the nineteenth century. In degree of technical elaboration as well as in language, these scholarly traditions offered a kind of social knowledge more esoteric and distant than the social scientists possessed before and thus increased the need and opportunity for professional control. While to some extent the German model of professional status and specialized knowledge influenced all the new social scientists of the 1880s, it appeared to influence those in the militant groups most strongly. Many of the younger traditionalists either studied only in this country or were critical of their German mentors. But the militants were more impressed by their German hosts and more immersed in German scholarship. They thus sought entrance to the university in a manner that utilized the collegiality of their German-based research ideal and gave maximum power to the professional credentials attached to that ideal.

The desire of these academics of the 1880s to establish their disciplines as academic professions would not have met with success, however, had it not been for one timely development—the modernization and expansion of the

---

20. Herbst, The German Historical School, chap. 1; Veysey, Emergence of the American University, pp. 125–33; Ringer, Decline of the German Mandarins.
universities. There were already by the early 1880s more social science aspirants than there were academic jobs for them. Ely and Hall, for example, had been nearly destitute for a time on their return from Germany. Hall and Burgess had rushed at the chance to teach at their unreformed collegiate alma maters, and had university reform not allowed them to move to more promising institutions, they may well have remained where they were and been forced to modify their aims.

The social scientists followed in a long line of scholars who had tried to establish an ideal of scholarly research in American colleges. Earlier in the nineteenth century some of the natural science fields, and then philology and modern languages, had felt the impact of the research ideal. Intermittently scholars in these fields had forced the colleges to accept their demands for less elementary teaching and more time and facilities for research. But in a few cases in the 1870s and increasingly in the 1880s, college presidents and trustees became willing partners in this process.

Thus the professional ideal of the young research-oriented scholars gained prominence in American universities as the position of the cultivated elite gradually weakened, even in its locus of greatest strength—the college community. In England, the traditional ideal of the teacher as moral guide and member of a broadly literate community of gentlemen commanded far greater resources, in the nation and the universities, and thus was able to subordinate the demand for specialized research-oriented disciplinary communities. In American academe, however, the professional ideal of the genteel culture could not withstand the inroads made by the aggressive, competitive, professionalizing activities of the research-oriented newcomers.

Connected to the rise of the new university, and stretching out from it, was the power of a respectable and literate middle class. Ultimately, the ability of the militant social scientists to sustain their claims for a place in the universities and for professional standing rested on the willingness of the educated public to accept those claims. It may be that their functional orientation, their empirical scientific stance, and the specific vocabularies they applied to the problems of industrial society carried greater credibility and authority in the new industrial world than did the genteel norms and knowledge. But once established in the universities, the professionals fell heir to an important source of authority. As Veblen showed, the democratization of culture resulted in wide acceptance through the middle class of genteel respectability and its canons of intellectual and moral hierarchy. Although the professional academics had to fend off popular rivals, what is perhaps most striking is the rapidity with which their role was accepted and their knowledge sought. With relative ease—and sometimes hearing little change in content—the middle class public turned from the moral advice of the clergy to the expert advice of the university social scientists, from the old elite’s conception of
society as hierarchically ordered by virtue to the new elite's conception of society as a meritocracy, hierarchically ordered by competence.21

III.

The basic conditions that led to the development of separate, academic professions provided the basis for their scientism as well. The social sciences formed under the banner of science. The competitive university and professional contexts in which they grew required that they constantly prove and solidify their status as sciences. Given these underlying factors and the failure of the social sciences actually to achieve the kind of agreement that characterized the natural sciences, it is understandable that social scientists would continually try to reformulate and strengthen their methodological programs.22

The social scientists began, however, with very diverse conceptions of science. Methods and models continued to be drawn from parent humanistic disciplines as well as from natural science. The natural sciences themselves presented different models of scientific authority ranging from astronomy and physics, the reigning natural sciences of the eighteenth century, to physiology and biology, the rising sciences of life during the nineteenth century. Moreover, the heavy influence of German historicism on the social scientists of the 1880s led to the definition of scientific method as much in historical as in natural-science terms. Among the historically oriented economists, sociologists, and political scientists—like Ely, Small and Burgess—scientific method meant in large part historical method. However, many of them were methodologically unsophisticated (Small was an exception) and rhetorically linked their conception of social science methodology to the more scientifically prestigious fields of physiology or physics. Members of these idealistic historical schools, recognizing that their reformist goals involved not only scientific determination of facts but ethical judgments regarding values, believed it possible to include both those functions within the domain of science. Thus when Veblen asked in 1898, "Why Is Economics Not a Darwinian

---


22. Speaking for the militants in sociology, Small later remarked: "It was strategically necessary for these innovators . . . to gain ground by playing the academic game under the existing rules. Their instincts . . . prompted them to speak for a 'science' in the old uncritical sense, and having announced themselves as the exponents of a 'science,' they were under bonds to make good. . . . I have certain persuasive reasons for believing that the academic beginnings of all social sciences in this country were in this respect substantially like those of sociology." Small, "Fifty Years," pp. 801–2 n.
Science?" he was not only urging a more rigorous scientism on his colleagues but a Darwinian model of economics whose scientific authority neither the ethical historical school nor the classical market economists would accept.\textsuperscript{23}

The first generation of professional social scientists also had rather loose conceptions of empirical scientific method. In psychology, for example, empiricism initially denoted laboratory experimentation and direct observation but specified little else regarding how these procedures were to be carried out. In the other social sciences, little distinction was initially made between empiricism as the gathering of historical evidence from books and documents and empiricism as direct observation under systematic conditions.\textsuperscript{24} From the 1890s onward, however, efforts were made to achieve more rigorous scientific methods. Psychologists showed an increasing concern for rigor in laboratory investigation, and economists were attracted to statistical methods and theories capable of mathematical formulation, such as marginal utility theory. After the turn of the century, political scientists and sociologists displayed increasing concern over the development of techniques of observation that would enable them to understand the actual functioning of social and political processes.

Around 1912, however, a distinctly new voice appeared in the social science literature, and it swelled to a powerful chorus after World War I. Social scientists began to call for a more objective version of empiricism and social intervention. The new program was more quantitative and behavioristic and urged that social science eschew ethical judgments altogether in favor of more explicit methodology and objective examination of facts. While the call for objectivity sometimes expressed itself as a renewed commitment to empiricism, it also was apparent in efforts to revise general theory.

In psychology, the subject with the deepest roots in American collegiate philosophy, and therefore the strongest impulse to disengage from it, this scientistic impulse was profound and far-reaching. Enunciated first in 1912 and 1913 by John B. Watson, behaviorism sought to eliminate from psychology any dealings with subjective consciousness. Psychology was to observe and record only objective behavior, behavior that could be seen in, and understood entirely as, biological response. Although few followed Watson's attempt to reduce thought wholly to muscular behavior, his theory, his objectivist attitude, and his emphasis on achieving total prediction and control deeply influenced psychology and, more superficially, the other social sciences.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{24} For discussions of early methods, see Albrecht, "The New Psychology"; Ross, G. Stanley Hall, chap. 9; Somit and Tanenhaus, Development of Political Science. pp. 69, 76; Small and Vincent, Introduction to the Study of Society, chap. 3.

In economics, the interest in basic statistical data was augmented after the war by a more self-conscious group of younger institutionalists, such as Wesley C. Mitchell of Columbia. They were successors to the old historical school, but they were influenced by Veblen’s scientific stance and behaviorist psychology to call for a closer empirical study of the actual working of the economic institutions of capitalism.\textsuperscript{26} In sociology, Robert Park, who had early been disillusioned with reformers and attracted to direct investigation of social facts, dominated Chicago sociology during the 1920s with his program of urban research seen as basic science. More radical than Park was a group of objectivist sociologists, including Luther Lee Bernard and William F. Ogburn, who called for a behaviorist attitude and research program.\textsuperscript{27} In political science, Charles Merriam led the movement for a more systematic collection of data, exact methods, and the incorporation of the advances of neighboring sciences. Merriam also had in his camp younger colleagues who urged a more stringently behavioristic approach to the study of political processes.\textsuperscript{28} All of these groups hoped that the development of an objective science would eventually provide social scientists with the tools to exercise “social control.”

The conditions that led to the emergence of this more rigorous scientism have only begun to be investigated by historians. One factor appears to have been the increasingly aggressive influence of biology, and then of behaviorist psychology, on the other social sciences after about 1905. From about 1880 to 1905 the social sciences did not appear to feel that their free borrowings placed them under threat, either institutional or intellectual, from the natural sciences or from the more rapidly advancing psychology. After 1905, however, there is evidence of greater sensitivity to, and defensiveness against, both biology and psychology in the face of new currents within these subjects—Mendelian genetics, the mechanistic philosophy of Jacques Loeb, behaviorism. The social sciences thus had to disengage from their old roots in


an outmoded biology, protect their social spheres from total absorption by a mechanistic biology or behavioristic psychology, and prove by the more rigorous standards of these schools the genuine character of their own sciences.

Another level of explanation for the particular kind of scientism espoused by American social science lies in the political-institutional context. The political and professional pressures that had pushed social scientists toward a centrist political stance from 1880 to 1905 could feed into scientism. When Richard Ely and E. A. Ross were attacked for their political heterodoxy, they made it clear to their colleagues that they would henceforth do only genuinely scientific work. Many in the growing political center of Progressive reform appeared to believe that in accepting the goals set by the society at large they were eschewing ethics for science. The later cycle of political heterodoxy and postwar reaction appeared to produce similar results. Whether social scientists wished to retreat from the public arena altogether or only to hide the political implications of their work, a program of basic quantitative or behavioral science and such scientistic euphemisms as “social control,” “adjustment,” or “social reconstruction” were appropriate shields.29

Not only on a political level did conflicts in values lead toward scientism. In late-nineteenth-century America, the breakup of Protestant village culture by the industrial economy and the rise of the heterogeneous city precipitated a profound crisis in values. While there had been different and competing value systems in America before, there had not been a large class of educated people whose allegiance was so deeply divided. The division of intellectual authority itself between village and religious sources on the one hand and more modern and scientific sources on the other created, in the minds of people shaped by both, severe conflicts in values.30

In the waning light of natural law conceptions, science could appear to resolve these conflicts by making value decisions itself. The most popular solutions in late-nineteenth-century America were attempts to root values directly in scientific evolutionary laws. Within an evolutionary framework, the disparate ideals of the older, agrarian and commercial society and the newer heterogeneous, urban one, and the countercurrents of emotional expression and rational control that the Victorian culture had organized into

29. The scientism induced by the war needs considerable research. The motives expressed in Merriam, “Present State of the Study of Politics,” suggest that for him, science served as a kind of liberal detour that would avoid the violent ideological conflict that had overrun political discourse, make good the defeat of Progressivism, and lead back ultimately to greater social usefulness. For evidence of concern with the political advantages of an objective scientific stance, see Karl, Charles E. Merriam.

sexuai and class roles—all these could be hierarchically arranged and pinned down on a scale of races, classes, sexes, and historical stages, rooted in nature itself and organized to display the future triumph of traditional virtues.

Explicitly or implicitly many of the new social scientists shared all or part of this evolutionary viewpoint. Yet for many, the empiricist program and its reformist values implied contrary hierarchies. Exposure to the complex life of modern society and the insistent exploration of irrationality in human nature led many to grapple more directly with the problem of values. No one described the resulting sense of crisis more tellingly than Albion Small in 1902. The problem, he said, was the breakdown of the older Protestant standard of values, the fragmentation of society into a multiplicity of ethnic groups and functional roles, each of which provided a different framework of values and viewpoints from which to understand the world. More than that, these conflicting values had polarized around a set of fundamental problems:

We are dealing in modern society with certain radical questions; e.g., Shall we aim for physical enjoyment, or for extinction of sensuous desire? Shall we posit an ideal of government or no government? Shall we plan for private property or communism, for monopoly or competition, for freedom of thought or for perpetual social chaperoning of mind and conscience? These are not questions of biology, or civics, or economics, or theology. They are not questions of ways and means. They are not problems of how to do things. They are questions of what is fit to do.³¹

Small, rooted as he was in the older moral philosophy, argued that the only solution was for sociology to discover the totality of relations that composed modern society and, on the basis of that scientific knowledge, to construct a hierarchy of values.

Other social scientists, perhaps those less deeply and personally rooted in the older morality, could not face that task with equanimity. For these people science offered an alternative solution to the conflict of values: it enabled value decisions to be avoided altogether. For example, Robert Park, Small’s successor at Chicago, was early immobilized by the painful problem of value judgment and sought to escape in the distance of objective science. “There is only one thing I can do,” Park had concluded, “understand.” The program for sociology he developed urged scientists not to make value judgments but only to exercise their insight and empathy in understanding the values of their subjects.³² Some behaviorists went further. John B. Watson, raised and edu-

---

cated in a rural, provincial, and religious South Carolina milieu, was thrown suddenly into the midst of Chicago, the subtleties of philosophy, and the power of the irrational exposed by Freud, and he reacted violently. Watson apparently escaped the strange and threatening panoply of conflicting values by urging scientists to avoid the consciousness of their subjects altogether, to deal with them wholly externally, as objects.

It may be that the emergence of this fiercely objective social science reflected in part the appearance of a distinctly new generation of social scientists. Among the leadership, at least, Watson, Mitchell, and Merriam were all born in the 1870s and had received their training in the United States, under the first professional generation. Imbued with the scientific hopes of their teachers, they could nonetheless easily perceive—as each new generation has been able to do—the values that lay just below the surface of their mentors' claimed objectivity. Yet the accelerating crisis in values affected them as sharply as their elders, indeed more so, for they were without the unconscious legacy of the old moral idealism. Such a generational experience could have been involved in the attempt of these social scientists to form an objective, value-free social science.

Finally, from an institutional point of view, the war and the greater centralization of science it inaugurated augmented the contacts between the social sciences and the natural sciences and increased the vulnerability of the social sciences to their standards. The federal government's organization of science and its control of research funds were still meager during this period, but in the following years they constituted an ever more powerful magnet, drawing the social sciences toward the development of their disciplines along apolitical and value-free scientific lines acceptable to the natural sciences and to the government.

The wave of scientism launched before and after World War I did not wholly prevail. Older methods and models persisted and scientific aspirations considerably outran scientific capabilities. Moreover, scientism set in motion substantial countercurrents in defense of social science methods that took into account the uniquely human attributes of subjectivity and choice. And when reformist attitudes arose in the society at large, as they did again in the 1930s


and 1960s, they stimulated reactions against scientism in the name of a more explicitly value-oriented social science.

The result of these interacting processes is the imposition of a cyclical pattern upon the search for more sophisticated methods, as waves of scientism recede under the impact of political activism and the failure of scientific results to match scientistic rhetoric, and as conservative political pressures and the recognition of scientific inadequacy send social scientists again into a renewed commitment to the development of an objective science. These recurrent cycles of scientism appear to be rooted in the political and institutional contexts and bifurcated aims of the social sciences—contexts and purposes that were firmly established during the formative decades of the social sciences in America.