The state and social investigation in Britain and the United States

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Part II. Empiricism and the new liberalism

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Social investigation, social knowledge, and
the state: an introduction

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A passage in Hugh Heclo's study of the rise of the welfare state points
to the main concern of this book—the historical development of the
knowledge base on which, however precariously, the public policies of
modern governments depend. "Politics finds its sources," Heclo observes,
"not only in power but also in uncertainty—men collectively wondering
what to do." Uncertainty arises when accustomed ways of proceeding
with the public business no longer seem to fit the situation. Doubt incites
inquiry, and during inquiry, often pressured by crisis, issues begin to take
shape. Not all issues are equally mature, nor are all difficulties equally
matters of public concern. To find a place in the working vocabulary of
public affairs and to attain the culturally distinctive status of a "public
policy problem," with all the pervasiveness and persistence that such
problems call to mind, the issues must be in principle tractable, which
requires that the circumstances in which they are rooted must be perceived
and intelligible.

Finding feasible approaches to such problems begins with gauging the
direction and force of the political currents actually at work in society,
but judgments of feasibility draw on something more than prudential
calculations of this sort. The search also involves an intellectual quest
for hypothetical possibilities, conceivable solutions, of a different kind.
"Governments not only 'power' (or whatever the verb form of that ap-
proach might be)," Heclo insists, "they also puzzle. Policy making is a

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form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf; it entails both deciding and knowing."[1]

In drawing attention to the point that the life of government depends on inquiry as well as edict, intelligence as well as will, Heclo highlights a neglected feature of the modern state: its pervasive reliance on a changing store of social knowledge, including information and ideas about what social problems are, what is known about such problems, what further data are needed to improve comprehension of them, and what might be done about them. To a degree that would have been unimaginable in earlier times, the cultural atmosphere within which modern government proceeds is composed of vast amounts of stylized evidence on social and economic conditions and trends. The collective puzzlement to which Heclo refers is not a quiet, carefully focused intellectual exercise that follows rigid rules. Rather, shaped by the insights and oversights of past puzzlers and conducted by adversaries as well as collaborators, the necessary reflection takes place in a busy public setting, in a swelling, information-rich environment fed continually by many interested parties, all intending to have some bearing on the activities of government.

In keeping with this milieu, the rhetoric of political leadership and policy debate has come to be an empirically grounded style of argument and exhortation. Claims and counterclaims about what the public good requires, assertions about what the government ought to do or undo, are bolstered by favored bits of information plucked from the vortex of testimony, studies, reports, and just-released data that swirls around the institutions of the state. For modern governments, selecting, justifying, and implementing policies of any sort means finding workable grounds for them. This search is a complex historical undertaking, a reflexive process that draws on all the capacities of public office and all the relevant linkages between government and the private, voluntary, or civil sector of society. In the search for workable grounds, none of the special powers with which officials are equipped is more important than the power to look into things. The power to investigate, inherent in the modern state, furnishes the sensorium of the public. The evolution and elaboration of the central operations of today's governments are inconceivable without its exercise. Even allowing for the fact that legislators sometimes legislate first and justify afterwards, lawmaking cannot be divorced from processes

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[1]Hugh Heclo, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden: From Relief to Income Maintenance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 305.

of legislative inquiry; nor can administrative development and direction be divorced from bureaucratic processes of inquiry and report, or adjudication from processes of review and reasoned deliberation.[2]

Taken together, this set of cultural circumstances constitutes the knowledge base that government draws on for whatever general sense of direction and legitimacy it enjoys. Unless the metaphor of a "knowledge base" is carefully deployed, it may suggest a solidity and mass to the grounds for policy that are belied by reports on the political uses of social knowledge. Both participants and scholars cite, in case after case, the inadequacy and ambiguity of such knowledge and the neglect, distortion, or misuse of whatever relevant information may exist by parties to the conflicts that make up policy history. But use of the metaphor need not imply hidden assertions regarding either certitude or consensus with respect to the grounds of policy. When the phrase is broadly conceived, so as to allow for a measure of incompleteness, ambiguity, and disputed meaning, there yet remains a usefulness to the metaphor that alternatives, whether more specific or more general in connotation, do not possess. The "knowledge base" concept points to the fact that in modern societies there are reasons for policies. Above all else, policies are intentional patterns of action. Correct or incorrect, wise or unwise, each was once conceived as an answer to a problem.

Reasons must be distinguished from opinions. It is true, to be sure, that governance takes place within a climate of prevailing opinion. In the writing of political history, reference to such climates and to changes within them is typically a way of describing, in shorthand form, complicated shifts of viewpoint and evaluation regarding the duties of the state on the part of those political elites most closely and continuously engaged with the affairs of government. Yet because the "climate of opinion" metaphor is a shorthand device, it may scant the *reasons* that people give for their opinions, and fail altogether to detect any connection between changing opinion, on the one hand, and a changing context of knowledge, information, and argument on the other.

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[2]For a discussion of the central importance of information-gathering and -monitoring activities of civil administration in Britain during its emergence as a world power, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). William R. Brock, *Investigation and Responsibility: Public Responsibility in the United States, 1865–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), provides a comparable account of investigations bearing on social-policy questions at the state level of government in the United States during the last third of the nineteenth century.

In contrast, to ask about the knowledge base for public policy is to invite attention to the specific, documented reasons invoked for changes of viewpoint and evaluation; to be alert to the kinds of evidence cited by contemporaries as factors at work in the process; and to inquire not simply into the structure of conflicting interests involved in struggles over policy, but into the arguments and supporting proofs used by adversaries to make their case as well. The task requires that, in thinking about the history of governance, one take notice of the appearance from time to time of new kinds of evidence and styles of formulating it; new types of expertise thought to be relevant for understanding public problems (e.g., economics, social work, demographics, forecasting, polling, regional planning); new practices intended to elicit pertinent testimony; and new kinds of institutions with functions that are intended to alter in some way the climate of knowledge within which informed opinion takes shape and the struggle for directive control of government goes on. Perhaps most important, the task requires a sensitivity to the discourse of public policy, to changes in the vocabulary and concepts that people have employed in their attempts to make sense of social problems and government's changing role in connection with them.[3]

To the extent that questions of this sort can be asked and answered, it is clear that the knowledge-base metaphor points to a complex and elusive reality in politics and governance. The complexity of it reflects the diversity of perspectives on social questions. No one person commands a holistic view. The central institutions of government are themselves complex and of different kinds. Legislatures, courts, executive agencies—each has a different task, each is subject to different societal pressures, and each represents a different milieu of knowledge and tradition, a different vocabulary and style of reasoning. A similar but greater diversity exists among the many nongovernment bodies that engage in social investigation. Within and between these different knowledge sub-

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[3]In connection with the possibilities of new scholarly approaches to the discourse of politics and public policy, see Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). This collection of essays on political language explores the implications for historical analysis of the fact that politics is conceptually and communicatively constituted. It provides "conceptual histories" for a number of key terms in political discourse. On the issues of method involved, see particularly James Farr's chapter, "Understanding Conceptual Change Politically," 24–49. See also in the same vein Daniel T. Rogers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), and the discussion of the meanings of monopoly and labor in Chapter 5 of this volume.

cultures, knowledge claims, as applied to policy, are routinely disputed. The public interplay of assertion and refutation contributes to the ongoing drama of politics.

The knowledge base is not composed exclusively or even largely of expert information and theory, though the cross-examination of expertise is, in fact, one of the processes that feed into it. Rather, the knowledge base is compound, in the sense that it draws on at least three different kinds of knowledge: (1) disciplinary and professional knowledge; (2) informed opinion of the sort necessarily possessed by elites in politics, government, the media, and active interest groups; and (3) those general forms of cultural beliefs and values, widely shared, that shape civic culture, providing a sense of propriety and impropriety that is called on in evaluating the nature of social problems and proposed remedies to them.[4]

The knowledge base is compound in a temporal sense as well, reflecting the accretion of layers of new data and new ordering principles. A historical phenomenon, it bears the markings of the relevant institutional innovations of the past. Stratigraphy within the base would reveal the presence of government institutions of several varieties, including both those concerned with central statistical operations designed for gathering general intelligence on social and economic conditions (e.g., census bureaus) and more specialized investigative bureaus serving the purposes of the special departments (e.g., Treasury or Defense). In addition, reflecting the development over time of a complex social structure, there would be evidence that a variety of private or voluntary institutions had contributed to shaping the base as well. To cite one instance, the modern university, with its roots in cultural changes of the late nineteenth century, has from the first provided an institutional home for the social scientific disciplines that have played a major role (as sources of theory, criticism, ferment, challenge, reinforcement, and personnel) in the ongoing cultural effort to bring social and political problems under intellectual control. The philanthropic foundation, essentially a twentieth-century institution, has played a large part in the organization and patronage of research relevant to public affairs. So have the research arms of interest-group lobbies and,

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[4]For a discussion of a typology, suggested by Robert Cuff, that distinguishes professional, practical, and cultural forms of knowledge with reference to economic beliefs, see Mary O. Furner and Barry Supple, "Ideas, Institutions and the State in the United States and Britain: An Introduction," in the volume they edited, *The State and Economic Knowledge: The American and British Experiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11–14.

especially in the United States, the public policy "think tanks," which are of similar vintage to the foundations and often dependent on them.[5]

The complexity of the knowledge base should not be confused with its adequacy to its many tasks. Contemporary governments are everywhere beset by skepticism about the social knowledge foundations of their policies and pressed to demonstrate the necessity for many of the social and economic roles that they have had in the past. The deepest of all assumptions about the value of democratic government—deeper even than those that stress the importance of participation—is the belief that there are good and sufficient reasons, based ultimately in objective, impersonal, discursively communicable knowledge, for the laws and policies that issue from its proper functioning. Therefore such skepticism represents a more general challenge to the future of governance than is typically acknowledged by political parties or by writers in the various ideological traditions of social criticism. Even as capitalist democracy triumphed as a social form, its premises as a civic system were and continue to be challenged by a pervasive, ubiquitous, and frequently well-warranted cynicism regarding the sources of political action.

To understand better the challenge to today's liberal democratic state, it is necessary to glance backward in time on the development of the knowledge base that grew up in dynamic relation to it and to historicize the connections between them, seeking deeper insight into the interplay of social thought, political institutions, and public policy. The chapters that follow are intended as contributions to that effort. A product of an ongoing Wilson Center project on relations between the forms and capacities of government and the growth of knowledge, this volume is a companion study to *The State and Economic Knowledge: The American and British Experiences*. The editors hope that, like the essays in its companion volume, those presented here will help to demonstrate the mutuality of influence that links the state and social investigation, and that they will register the point, simple and yet far-reaching in its implications, that when the knowledge base on which the operations of

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[5]On the history and politics of the think tanks, see Chapter 7 in this volume. See also James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Joseph G. Peschek, *Policy-Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America's Rightward Turn* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). On the role of philanthropic foundations in generating the knowledge base for public policy, see Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, "The American Private Philanthropic Foundation and the Public Sphere, 1890–1930," *Minerva* 19, no.2 (Summer 1981): 236–70, and idem,"Foundations and Ruling Class Elites," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 116, no.7 (Winter 1987): 1–40.

public policy depend is considered, the active, ongoing knowledge-generating activities of the various agencies and components of government itself must be taken into account. Governments must know in order to act. If the kind of knowledge they require is readily available, they make use of it. If not, they do what they can, directly or indirectly, to bring it into being. Both the efficiency and the legitimacy of government operations in the long run depend on their doing so. In their efforts to secure the grounds for legitimate political agency, governments have been producers as well as consumers of social knowledge, mobilizers as well as mobilized.

THE GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE HISTORIES OF STATES

A state, Woodrow Wilson wrote, is "a people organized for law within a definite territory."[6] Wilson's terse definition captures one of the essentials of our organizing idea: that governments are the deliberate, purposeful organizers of states. What Wilson's definition fails to capture is the dynamic relationships, changing over time and from context to cultural context, between the roles and functions of states. The tasks assigned to government—be they social or economic regulation, population planning, poor relief, or whatever—interact in complex ways with the forms and functions of knowledge, on the one hand, and the institutions of social inquiry engaged in the making of government policies, on the other.

To help recapture this connection between the state and social knowledge, this chapter offers a sketch of the history of Anglo-American social investigation and suggests something of the meaning of the enterprise for those involved in shaping it. It stresses the importance of the rise of social empiricism in the nineteenth century, and its influence on the formation of the new liberalism from the 1880s onward. It discusses major examples of twentieth-century social investigation, describes its contemporary context, and comments on the challenge to processes of inquiry into the public and its problems posed by the growth of various forms of skepticism regarding the links between knowledge and policy. The chapter closes with some suggestions for new lines of research.

Gianfranco Poggi has made an important start on the job of historicizing the state in a way that invites attention to the changing knowledge base on which it depends. Writing in the tradition of comparative his-

[6]Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics*, rev. ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1909), 8.

torical sociology, Poggi identifies three developmental processes in the rise of the state and its connection with science since early modern times. All have to do with the phenomenon of rule. First, the state expanded and consolidated its authority in a "centralization of rule," taking place over centuries that was most evident in the dynamics of nineteenth-century nationalism. Second, the state took on new duties; this process was intimately bound up with the growth of government in the nineteenth century and, on an increasingly massive scale, in the twentieth. The growth of government was neither steady nor uniform, but over the long stretch it reflected what Poggi calls the "functionalization" of rule, a process through which the more advanced states were increasingly engaged as instruments for attaining wider social purposes. Max Weber, from a different perspective, associated this trend with the inertial complexities of the modern bureaucratic state.[7]

Third, and throughout, there were changes in the cognitive aspects of governance, a process Poggi calls the "rationalization" of rule. This process reflected the ongoing effort to base the exercise of social power not on custom, which Enlightenment thinkers rejected as a guide, or on the arbitrary will of hereditary rulers, but—particularly with the appearance of democratic and republican ideas calling for representative government—on the application of an appropriate body of knowledge and procedure. In contrast to the first two processes, the third is little understood and has been relatively neglected as a subject of study. As a subject it is coextensive with the historical development of what we have been calling the knowledge base of public policy. That development begins, for all practical purposes, with the gradual historic shift from a framework of beliefs that centered on ideas of *rights to rule* existing within providential conceptions of political order, enjoyed by hereditary rulers, to new social and political conventions that centered on *the duties of rule,* which began to take shape in the era of the Enlightenment. Poggi argues that the shift stimulated an attempt at the "scientization" of politics, the search for new kinds of knowledge, different from inherited juridical forms, to guide officials and to justify the actions they took to fulfill their growing repertory of functions. As the gradual rise of mass democracy was channeled through the workings of representative political institutions, and as new bureaucracies and regulatory regimes were

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[7]Gianfranco Poggi, "The Modern State and the Idea of Progress," in Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce, eds., *Progress and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 337–60, passim.

devised in response to public problems, rather inexorably the state took on its contemporary guise, and came to be seen as a "container" of social processes and a "facility" through which society could exercise leverage on itself.[8]

THE MEANING AND TYPES OF SOCIAL INVESTIGATION

Poggi is especially alert to the importance of the cognitive components of state action and to the ways in which the development of these components stimulates the growth of new kinds of knowledge in the surrounding society. In early modern times, to the extent that there was a discourse of public policy that foreshadowed the discourse of later days, the language of statecraft was juridical language. It was rooted in traditions of jurisprudence, particularly natural jurisprudence. With the rise of the modern state, however, nonjuridical forms of knowledge, those rooted in the histories of the natural and the social sciences, for example, came to play an increasingly significant part in the life of governance.[9]

Discussion of the historical development of the knowledge base for the administrative and regulatory activities of the state—the attempted "scientization of politics," to use Poggi's formulation—involves special difficulties of terminology and focus. We have found it useful in confronting this problem to employ a heuristic device of some generality. Thus the category *social investigation* is used, not in the narrow sense, to refer to this or that particular inquiry (or method of inquiry) into poverty, for example, or into the conditions of life for the working classes, although these are included in its scope, but in a broader sense, to refer

[8]Ibid., 341–8. See also Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), and idem, *The State: Its Nature, Development, and Prospects* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). The first book is concerned mainly with the rise of the state in continental Europe and devotes the bulk of its discussion to developments prior to the twentieth century; the second volume deals in large part with controversies surrounding the liberal democratic state of the twentieth century.
[9]In *The State: Its Nature, Development, and Prospects,* Poggi observes with respect to the growing significance of nonjuridical forms of knowledge, "Even where law was taken most seriously, its application to concrete circumstances called for sound knowledge and reliable information concerning factual conditions, not just legal norms. Thus, from relatively early on in the development of the state, efforts were made by individual states to collect data on demographic and economic conditions (the term 'statistic' bears witness to this) and to keep themselves abreast of developments in the material and organizational technology of production. Of course, states also sought, more or less successfully, to develop and apply know-how relevant to their two overriding (and overlapping) concerns— the collection of taxes and the organizing, equipping, and deploying of armies and navies" (p. 32).

to an ongoing *process* of public inquiry into social conditions, especially problematic ones, with the intention of bringing knowledge to bear on the decisions and functions of governance. Public social investigation is conducted by the knowledge-generating agencies of government, but many of the investigative processes of "private" bodies, located, strictly speaking, in civil society, are public in the sense that the offices of state and public opinion are their intended object and audience.

In considering the types and history of social investigation understood in these general terms, one is dealing not only with specific individuals, problems, and methods of investigation, but with a broader phenomenon, traceable through the public records, that issues in the cultural history of the modern state. The precise origins of the trend toward an inquiring, would-be problem-solving style of governance remain obscure, but certainly social investigation as an ongoing process of public inquiry into social problems was under way in both Britain and the United States by the 1830s. Gaining authority, social investigation engaged the attention and the energies of a great many people on both sides of the Atlantic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, later in the twentieth century, it became a permanent, though increasingly problematic, feature of the context of thought and action through which politics shapes government. In the contemporary situation, the forms and methods of bringing knowledge to bear on public policy have become so numerous, so routinized in both state and civil society, so specialized, so inaccessible as expert policy talk, and so frequently challenged as partial, deceptive enmeshed in schemes for domination, or irrelevant that the usefulness of such knowledge for purposes of public guidance and legitimation is undermined by a growing popular skepticism, and by philosophically grounded attitudes of relativism regarding the grounds for law and policy.

Before we address the contemporary problem, it is useful to consider the meaning of social investigation when the cultural practice itself was in its heyday, its participants confident and forward-looking, in the late nineteenth century. In one of the most celebrated autobiographies of the period, Beatrice Webb wrote:

Now, without pretending to sum up the influence of the time-spirit on the social activities of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, what is clear is that upon me—in 1883, a woman of twenty-five—it led to a definite conclusion. From the flight of emotion away from the service of God to the service of man, and from

the current faith in the scientific method, I drew the inference that the most hopeful form of social service was the *craft of a social investigator* [emphasis added]. And some such conclusion seems to have been reached by many of my contemporaries. For detailed descriptions of the life and labour of the people in all its various aspects, sensational or scientific, derived from personal observation or statistical calculation, become a characteristic feature of the publications of the period, whether newspapers or magazines, plays or novels, the reports of philanthropic organizations or the proceedings of learned societies. It may be said that this novel concentration of attention on the social condition of the people was due neither to intellectual curiosity nor to the spirit of philanthropy, but rather to a panic fear of the newly enfranchised democracy. But this is looking at the same fact from another standpoint. For even the most fanatical socialist asserted that his hopes for the future depended on a deliberately scientific organization of society, combined with the growth among the whole body of the people of a desire and capacity for disinterested social service.[10]

In justifying her life's work, Webb spoke of the craft of social investigator as a vocation, not simply as a scientific specialty. For her and for many others, the vocation was part of a thriving, middle-class subculture devoted to public service and social reform. Its members, including a talented cadre of educated women in both Britain and the United States, were drawn from the modernizing, knowledge-bearing occupations and professions. As William Leach and others have shown, there were strong affinities between feminist ideology, which many men, of course, shared, and the new ways of conceiving the social problem and its resolution. In addition, studying the lives of the poor, particularly those of poor women and children, extended the nurturing role assigned to women and conformed to the assumed capacities and limitations of gender.

This educated, middle-class, feminist, science-and-social-reform subculture, as a number of the chapters in this volume remind us, had been present and growing since the 1830s. In addition to the example provided by British and American abolitionists who documented the conditions of slave life, we can easily note others among those who sought improvement in the care of prisoners, the indigent, and the insane. In the United States, Dorothea Dix and the landslide of reports she pushed on state legislatures in the 1840s, seeking humane care of the mentally ill, are illustrative of the pattern and the investigative subculture in which it flourished. Those who lived within it were involved in cultivating the various nonjuridical forms of knowledge we have mentioned, relating to

[10]Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), 150–1.

public health and safety, for example, or public education, or, as Webb points out, to empirical social description of different kinds.[11]

As Webb indicates, many of her contemporaries shared her feelings about the general aims of social investigation and its relevance to politics and public policy, among them, in America, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, John Dewey, and W. E. B. Du Bois. In that subculture, what counted was not so much one's status as a government insider or a critic outside government, but rather a general spirit of optimism regarding the possibilities of the new knowledge as a basis for policy that transcended differences among participants regarding the proper objects or methods of public inquiry and assistance, and united public and private investigators.[12]

Jane Addams, in her autobiography, discussed the permeability of boundaries separating public and private so far as social investigation was concerned. Detailing the early activities and investigations undertaken by the residents of Hull House, she remarked that "the best results are to be obtained in investigations as in other undertakings by combining our researches with those of other public bodies or with the State itself." In both Britain and the United States, in other words, the investigative community that nurtured the new, politically relevant forms of nonjuridical knowledge cut across the boundaries of conventions and roles separating the public world of officialdom from the private world of church, family, school, work, and philanthropy. Just as Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois were acquainted with the investigations directed

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[11]William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Helen E. Marshall, *Dorothea Dix: Forgotten Samaritan* (1937; New York: Russell and Russell, 1967); and Linda Gordon, "Social Insurance and Public Assistance: The Influence of Gender in Welfare Thought in the United States, 1890–1935," *American Historical Review* 97, no.1 (February 1992): 19–50. This last explores the activities, thought, and impact of women welfare reformers from the beginnings of the progressive era through the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935.

[12]An excellent example of such differences among female social empiricists is presented in Jane Lewis, "The Place of Social Investigation, Social Theory, and Social Work in the Approach to Late Victorian and Edwardian Social Problems: The Case of Beatrice Webb and Helen Bosanquet," in Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Katherine Kish Sklar, eds., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 148–69. See also Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), and Katherine Kish Sklar, "Hull House Maps and Papers: Social Science as Women's Work in the 1890's," in Bulmer et al., eds., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective,* 111–47.