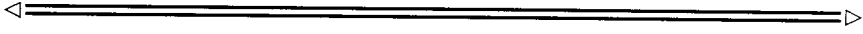


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## PART I



# European social science in antebellum America

## 1

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## The discovery of modernity

The social sciences began in America by importing and adapting models of political economy, political science, and sociology developed in Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These were new ways of understanding the historical world, born out of a new kind of historical consciousness and shaped by the emerging contours of capitalist society.

The social sciences originated in the eighteenth century in an effort to understand the character and future of modern society. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Condorcet's *Outline of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), and J. G. Herder's *Ideas towards a Philosophy of History* (1784–91) were exemplary texts of the new sciences. Premised on a decisive difference between modern society and its feudal and ancient forerunners, they envisioned social sciences that would guide modern society into the future. The effort to create social sciences was bound up with the discovery that history was a realm of human construction, propelled ever forward in time by the cumulative effects of human action, and taking new qualitative forms.<sup>1</sup>

1 The claim that the social sciences originated in a historical question, namely the character and future of modern society, has been generally made for sociology and its classic nineteenth-century texts: Philip Abrams, "The Sense of the Past and the Origins of Sociology," *Past and Present*, no. 55 (May 1972): 18–19; Theda Skocpol, "Sociology's Historical Imagination," in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, ed. Theda Skocpol (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–2, 20. That the claim holds good for economics and political science and their exemplary eighteenth-century texts, as well, can be seen in Duncan Forbes, "'Scientific' Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar," *The Cambridge Journal*, 7 (August 1954): 643–70; Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), chaps. 4–6; Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (New York: Viking, 1976). Although Montesquieu lacked a sense of the cumulative movement of history in time, he was a central figure in the recognition of history as a human construction. See, in addition to Berlin, Friedrich Meinecke, *Historicism*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan

This understanding of history was a late and complex achievement of the modern West. At the end of the Middle Ages, history was not intelligible in terms of human actions. The ultimate causes and meaning of historical events on earth were understood by Christian minds to lie in the supernatural world, in the sequence of eternal Christian time within which earthly history was enacted. The long dominance of that view and the heritage of ancient idealism had sharply limited the understanding of historical change. Within the medieval framework, the timeless realm of nature was subject to rationality and law, but the succession of particular events that constituted history could only be understood as pure chance; as repetitive and hence timeless custom; as devolution or decay from the ideal, rational forms which essentially defined human existence; or as the occasional scene of divine action.<sup>2</sup>

The modern understanding of history was one aspect of the broader movement toward secularization. The Christian view that eternal time was punctuated by an ascending sequence of sacred events was projected into secular time, imparting a degree of meaning and progressive organization to history. At the same time, the changing earthly world was slowly loosed from the eternal world of God and His immutable truth, and secular modes of understanding the particular configurations of human history gained authority. Change could then be understood as a succession of qualitatively different phenomena, not merely as random variations, or the surface appearance of essentially unchanging things, or the recurring cycle of an endless wheel. The past became both qualitatively different from and causally linked to the present. It was not until the early nineteenth century that this understanding of history as a continuous procession of qualitative changes came fully into view and that many European thinkers began to interpret the whole of reality, including what had earlier been conceived as absolute and unchanging, in contextual historical terms. I will call this new view of history “historicism” and this new interpretive tendency, “historicism.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul, 1972), chap. 3. These texts have been chosen in part for their importance to the social sciences in America and in part to illustrate the diversity of the tradition. I believe my argument would hold as well for such other exemplars as Adam Ferguson, Hume, Turgot, Vico, and Kant.

2 J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), pt. 1.

3 This definition follows Hayden V. White, “On History and Historicisms,” Introduction to *From History to Sociology. The Transition in German Historical Thinking*, by Carlo Antoni (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), xv–xxviii. Conceptions of historicism more closely attuned to German romanticism and German experience are developed by Meinecke, *Historism*, and Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968). A more limited philosophical definition of

The social sciences and historicism emerged together from a number of early modern cultural traditions. Despite the ancient separation between the rational understanding of nature and the particularistic understanding of historical events, both these approaches to the human world converged in the eighteenth-century discovery of modern society and in the work of Montesquieu, Smith, Condorcet, and Herder. Humanists and legal scholars began first to decipher the ways in which literature, art, and law varied between nations and across time and to explain those differences by natural and historical circumstances. Debate between the champions of ancient and modern culture and national conflicts over political power mobilized these traditions and made the difference of the past increasingly visible. The pioneer works of Montesquieu and Herder were among the fruits of this scholarship. Insisting on the qualitative differences between nations, they explored the roots of those differences in physical conditions, cultural influences, and historical experience. Herder, unlike Montesquieu, placed those differences fully in the dimension of time, so that each nation, rooted in a long-standing culture, had to work out its destiny in the new forms available to every age.<sup>4</sup>

The revival of civic humanism in Renaissance Italy and early modern Europe generated another source of historical understanding. Living still in the timeless world of rational forms and eternal salvation, Italian patriots revived the civic humanist ideal, that human beings fully realized themselves in political activity. The republic was the ideal polity, founded on and sustained by the balanced participation of the one, the few, and the many. This was a brave attempt to realize universal values in historical time and hence a decisive step toward investing historical time with meaning. As the creation of time, however, the republic would suffer the inevitably destructive effects of time. The virtuous republic was only a moment in a recurrent cycle of corruption and decay.

In their efforts to protect the republic from decay, republican thinkers over the next centuries came to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of historical causation. By the mid-eighteenth century, Whig and republican thinkers in Britain and France had begun to sense a paradoxical historical

historicism, which specifically excludes the historian's "historical sense," is discussed in Maurice H. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pt. 2. A still more limited, and tendentious, definition of historicism was popularized by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

4 Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1957); Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 42–52, 147–51, 167–9; Meinecke, *Historism*, chaps. 3, 9.

outcome: The simple agrarian historical conditions that secured the health of the republic belonged to the primitive past and the modern civilization, commerce, and refinement which Europe was calling progress produced republican decay. In response to this impasse, the social and historical thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, most notably Adam Smith, abandoned the republic for commercial improvement and turned the republican cycle into a multistage theory of historical progress. The message of Smith's new science of wealth was that modern Western society could for a long time to come escape the stasis or decline that had befallen all other societies by freeing the transformative energies of commerce and industry.<sup>5</sup>

The development of natural science through direct observation and manipulation of natural phenomena also contributed to the new perception of modern historical progress. In the influential program of Francis Bacon, the new men of science would improve and reconstruct life on earth along a progressively enlightened course. By the eighteenth century, the sweeping discoveries of Newton seemed to renew Bacon's promise. Enlightenment social thinkers found the progress of the practical arts and of science the most convincing evidence that modern society, heir to the cumulative gains of reason, would not succumb to barbarism or decay as its predecessors had. Upon this insight, Condorcet constructed a theory of progress as the advance of reason and proposed that social science light the way to the future.<sup>6</sup>

Science contributed in still another way to the modern conception of history by linking rational intelligibility to the particular configurations of history. In order to apply the new "experimental" method to the human world, David Hume urged observation of the "uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages." By marking how in certain constant circumstances, the unchanging propensities of human nature gave rise to constant consequences, and under given variations, varied in given ways, empirical laws could be discovered comparable to the laws scientists discovered in nature. This procedure was congenial with a tendency already at work in the older natural law tradition, which moved from the ideal laws of conduct revealed by "right reason" toward exploration of the relative action of reason in the imperfect conditions of human existence. Montesquieu,

5 Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, pts. 2, 3; Forbes, "'Scientific' Whiggism"; J. G. A. Pocock, "Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations between the Civic Humanist and the Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 235–52.  
 6 J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), chaps. 2, 5–7, 11; Baker, *Condorcet*, chap. 6.

*The discovery of modernity*

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Hume, and Smith were following that path when they explored the diverse rationality of human action under different circumstances. As Enlightenment thinkers became increasingly concerned with the problem of progress, they focused on that second and changing “nature” formed by manners, customs, and institutions. Although Smith assumed certain universal psychological propensities, like the propensity to barter, and posited universal laws of exchange, like the relationship of price to supply and demand, he was concerned with the progressive course of human development. He came to see that “all the arts, the sciences, law and government, wisdom and even virtue itself” were rooted in the economic organization of society, and hence changed as civilization progressed through the stages of hunting, herding, agriculture, and commerce.<sup>7</sup>

The social sciences were imbued at their inception with a new understanding of history and with high expectations of modernity. They approved the historical supports of modern society – commercial development, science, and in most cases, the representative state. Drawing on the Enlightenment understanding of civilization developed in Scotland and France, they defined modernity as diversification, in which the rude and simple structures of primitive and feudal life gave way to complexity, multiplying comforts, and multiplying values. Generated by the division of labor, as Adam Smith showed, and abetted by the advance and specialization of the sciences, diversification created a world in which individuals could choose multiple goals and realize varied potentialities. The social sciences were to be agents of improvement. Developed in the utilitarian milieu of the Enlightenment and in the moral discourses of the Scottish and German universities, their programs were in the broadest sense practical and moral. In their focus on the diverse realm of economic activity, practical arts, and refined enjoyments – a world of private values as opposed to the classical realm of political action – they discovered society and began to consider it the essential and most inclusive ground of human activity.<sup>8</sup>

From the outset the social sciences were also committed to using tools

7 Meinecke, *Historism*, 101–4; Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), chap. 4; Andrew S. Skinner, “Science and the Role of the Imagination,” in *A System of Social Science. Papers Relating to Adam Smith* ([Clarendon Press] Oxford University Press, 1979), 14–15; Forbes, “‘Scientific’ Whiggism,” 655–7. Smith’s quotation is from his lectures on jurisprudence, cited in Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 126.

8 Montesquieu belonged to an early and moderate phase of the Enlightenment. Herder was a partial exception, both accepting and rebelling against Enlightenment values. He believed in free self-determination as against a coercive state, the progress of humanity, and progress of the arts and sciences, but the diversity he valued was grounded in romantic holism rather than economic functionalism. See Berlin, *Vico and Herder*, 145–216.

provided both by natural science and by historical and cultural investigation. Their task of understanding the future tendency of history as well as their eighteenth-century sources yoked them to both universal laws of nature and particularistic understanding of historical culture and institutions. Condorcet sought to develop a statistical social science, based on mathematical laws of probability, that would provide the means for rational decision-making in politics. Smith followed Newton in searching for simple laws underlying widely varying phenomena, but he also imbedded those laws in a historical account of the economic, political, and social conditions that gave rise to commercial society and sustained it. Herder proposed an empirical, historical science that would use psychology and the study of language and culture to facilitate progress, primarily through education. His writings effected an uneasy synthesis between universal laws of nature, the differing circumstances of race, geography, and culture, and the moral purposes individuals and peoples enacted in history.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of modernity remains to this day the fundamental context in which to understand the social sciences, for the future of modern society remains their central question; diversification remains central to their understanding of modern society; moral and utilitarian goals continue to shape their programs; and diverse conceptions of scientific method still bridge general law and particularistic investigation. As history changes, however, new contexts emerge: the programs of the eighteenth-century originators of social science were transformed in important respects by the dynamic history that they had been among the first to recognize. By the early nineteenth century, the French Revolution and its contentious aftermath, the accelerated development of capitalism, and the growth of romanticism deepened the modern understanding of history and quickened the urgency with which social scientists examined the fate of modern society.

Although the eighteenth-century pioneers of social science had recognized the historical existence of modern society, most of them had not viewed all of human existence from a historicist perspective. For Montesquieu history still remained, like nature and divinity, essentially immutable, its distinctions and changes occurring as variations within a static framework. The Enlightenment idea of progress, with its confidence in human powers and unidirectional sense of time, marked a major step in the

<sup>9</sup> Baker, *Condorcet*, pt. 1; Skinner, "Science and the Role of the Imagination"; Forbes, "'Scientific' Whiggism"; H. B. Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970), chaps. 1, 2; F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [Clarendon Press], 1965), chaps. 6, 7.

direction of historicism, but progress still often remained the product of extrahistorical causes. For Condorcet, the law at work in history was the human ability to reason by combining sensations and ideas, and thereby to reason “according to the sentiment of virtue and the immutable law of right.” The progress of civilization was the result of the “necessary development of human faculties,” not of history. Smith’s account of the rise of commercial society recognized both the “natural” progression of civilization through economic stages and the force of historical contingencies and unintended consequences, as when the alliance of monarchs and burghers against feudal lords increased the strength of cities and the commercial class. Smith’s account could be read as a “natural” or “philosophical” history, in which the events of history were only the particular “accidents” through which a natural course of progression worked itself out. Or his account could be read as fundamentally historicist, so that the progressive order and the contingent actions that could subvert or encourage it existed equally within the open framework of history.<sup>10</sup>

The French Revolution, particularly the failures of that revolution, had a major effect in moving European thinkers toward historicism. As the Revolution fell into tyranny and reaction, the millennial and apocalyptic hopes it had aroused were projected into the secular future. Humanity was cast fully into history and salvation fully into historical time. Immanuel Kant, at the end of his life, as well as G. W. F. Hegel, expressed the new recognition that history alone was the arena in which humanity must work out its destiny.<sup>11</sup>

Romanticism also provided a fuller appreciation of the particular configurations of the historical world. Emerging in reaction to the Enlightenment attempt to subject all reality to universal and mechanistic general laws, the Romantics grounded value and sought intelligibility in the individuality and diversity of historical existence. The German *Aufklärer* anticipated the romantic reaction and the French Revolution stimulated romanticism and historicism all over Europe. As the Revolution carried its conflicts and

10 Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason*, chap. 3; Baker, *Condorcet*, 346. For a naturalistic reading of Smith, see Dugald Stewart, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith,” in Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Oxford: Oxford University Press [Clarendon Press], 1980), 292–6, and Andrew S. Skinner, “Natural History in the Age of Adam Smith,” *Political Studies*, 15 (February 1967): 32–48. For an interesting reading of Hume and Smith as historicists, see Don Herzog, *Without Foundations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

11 M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971); White, “On History and Historicisms,” xv–xix; Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).



French rule across the continent, its universal claims were countered with a new awareness of the individuality of different cultures and histories.<sup>12</sup> Historicism accentuated the diversity and contingency of the human past and future. In this new context, sharper tensions emerged between the complex particularity of history and the natural models of lawful regularity that had joined together in the social scientific program.

Historicism imposed on Western Europe – and on the social sciences – an immense historical and synthetic task, but before we examine it, we must understand that the task was made more difficult by the ideological contention that at once overtook it. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and the wake of industrial development, commercial classes challenged the traditional landowning class for political power and worker riots and radical protest challenged both. Fears of political and social revolution galvanized the social scientists' inquiry into the fate of modern society and reshaped their ideological bearings.

The term “liberal” was first adopted in the early nineteenth century by English and continental radicals who sought to destroy the remains of feudal and mercantilist power in the state and to place justice, representation, and economic activity on individualistic bases. The social sciences that had emerged in the eighteenth century belonged to the broad stream of social and political thought that was antecedent and tributary to liberalism. The eighteenth-century originators of social science were members of the social world of the reform-minded aristocracy and educated middle class, functionaries, professors, doctors, lawyers, and clerics who wanted to throw off the traditional restraints placed on reason and initiative. Their visions of society, polity, and economy acknowledged a central place for the rights, powers, or potentialities of the individual person.<sup>13</sup>

The liberalism that emerged in the early nineteenth century absorbed the Enlightenment's view of modern civilization as a realm of progressive diversification and its faith in commercial development, science, and representative government. Deriving social value and authority from the individual, liberals constructed an individualistic and libertarian political

12 Meinecke, *Historicism*; Iggers, *German Conception of History*; Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: The World and Work of LaCurne de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968); Thomas Preston Pardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing, 1760–1830* (New York: AMS Press, 1966).

13 N. T. Phillipson, “Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The University in Society*, 2 vols., ed. Lawrence Stone (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 2:407–48. Dorothy Ross, “Liberalism,” *Encyclopedia of American Political History*, 1984 ed., 2:750–63, lists the sources from which my account of liberalism is drawn.

language. Liberalism was, and still is, subject to differing interpretations and is put to different uses, depending upon what implications are drawn from the view that the individual is “self-possessed.” John Locke for example, a primary source of liberal theory, used a universalistic language capable of democratic as well as libertarian interpretation, when he argued that individuals stand in a state of nature, as before God, free and equal and that “every man’s soul belongs unto himself.” But Locke also emphasized the propertied bases of liberty. Reflecting the commercial capitalism of his day, he used property as a metaphor for all natural rights, whether of body, soul, or mind, or of material possessions made one’s own by labor. Moreover, he anchored in natural right the inequality of property that resulted from the use of money. The protection of property became the central reason men agreed to form a government.<sup>14</sup>

The divergence between the humanistic and commercial bases of liberalism has been compounded by the divergence between the negative and positive implications of freedom. Liberalism emerged from a judicial mode of thought in which liberty was understood as a specific grant or right bestowed by law, ultimately by the law of God or nature. This was a negative liberty, which left the person free from coercive authority to pursue specific activities and relationships. Still, liberty depended positively on an accountable government of laws to protect the individual’s natural rights. Adam Smith retained a strong sense of the proper, if limited, legislative functions of government and sought liberal supports for citizenship. In the nineteenth-century English liberal tradition, however, government could be consigned to little else beyond securing individual rights from the interference of others. Not only was the individual self-possessed, but a society composed of autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests was self-sustaining. In the very different German Kantian tradition, individual self-realization and the harmony of society were understood to require the positive actions of the state.<sup>15</sup> Liberalism everywhere presented an unsteady balance of conflicting tendencies. Its humanistic implications could be limited by its economic bias. Its individualistic premises could deny conceptions of public good and erode the virtues necessary to sustain society and polity. The liberalism about to emerge in early nineteenth-century England,

14 John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke* (Cambridge University Press, 1969); Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government”* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press [Clarendon Press], 1962).

15 Pocock, “Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers”; Donald Winch, *Adam Smith’s Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1978); James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).