

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Focusing on the disciplines of economics, sociology, political science, and history, this book examines how American social science came to model itself on natural science and liberal politics.

Professor Ross argues that American social science receives its distinctive stamp from the ideology of American exceptionalism, the idea that America occupies an exceptional place in history, based on her republican government and wide economic opportunity. Under the influence of this national self-conception, Americans believed that their history was set on a millennial course, exempted from historical change and from the mass poverty and class conflict of Europe. Before the Civil War, this vision of American exceptionalism drew social scientists into the national effort to stay the hand of time. Not until after the Civil War did industrialization force Americans to confront the idea and reality of historical change. The social science disciplines had their origin in that crisis and their development is a story of efforts to evade and tame historical transformation in the interest of exceptionalist ideals.

Professor Ross shows how each of the social science disciplines, while developing their inherited intellectual traditions, responded to changes in historical consciousness, political needs, professional structures, and the conceptions of science available to them. Hoping first in the Gilded Age to sustain fixed laws of nature and history, social scientists in the Progressive Era linked American history to Western liberal history and its modernizing forces to capitalism, democracy, and science. But they hastened to subject that history to scientific control and tried to carve out a realm of nature that would perpetuate exceptionalist ideals. By the 1920s, driven to harder versions of technological control, the social sciences had transmuted the dismaying uncertainties of history into controllable natural process.

This is the first book to look broadly at American social science in its historical context and to demonstrate the central importance of the national ideology of American exceptionalism to the development of the social sciences and to American social thought generally.

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# The Origins of American Social Science

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## IDEAS IN CONTEXT

*Edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, Quentin Skinner,  
and Wolf Lepenies*

The books in this series will discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related new disciplines. The procedures, aims, and vocabularies that were generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions among the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature may be seen to dissolve.

For titles published in the series, see page following the Index.

This series is published with the support of the Exxon Education Foundation.

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

# The Origins of American Social Science

Dorothy Ross



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1991

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and  
to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1991  
First paperback edition 1992  
Reprinted 1992, 1994, 1997

Typeset in Garamond

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available*

ISBN 0-521-35092-1 hardback  
ISBN 0-521-42836-X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

*To John and Ellen  
who grew up with this book*

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

Travellers in Switzerland who stepped across the Rhine where it flowed from its glacier could follow its course among medieval towns and feudal ruins, until it became a highway for modern industry, and at last arrived at a permanent equilibrium in the ocean. American history followed the same course. With pre-historic glaciers and medieval feudalism the story had little to do; but from the moment it came within sight of the ocean it acquired interest almost painful. . . . Science alone could sound the depths of the ocean, measure its currents, foretell its storms, or fix its relations to the system of Nature. In a democratic ocean science could see something ultimate. Man could go no further. The atom might move, but the general equilibrium could not change.

Henry Adams  
*History of the United States of America*, vol. 9

Contents

Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> ix
Abbreviations used in the footnotes	xi
Introduction	xiii
Part I European social science in antebellum America	
1 The discovery of modernity	3
2 The American exceptionalist vision	22
The national ideology of American exceptionalism 22	Antebellum contexts of social science 30
Lieber’s collegiate political science 37	Native traditions of political economy 42
Conclusions 48	
Part II The crisis of American exceptionalism, 1865–1896	
3 Establishment of the social science disciplines	53
The Gilded Age crisis 53	Historico-politics and republican principle 64
Exceptionalism revised in political economy: Francis Walker 77	The beginnings of sociology: Sumner and Ward 85
Conclusions 94	
4 The threat of socialism in economics and sociology	98
The socialist threat 98	Historicist challenge and exceptionalist response from Ely to Clark 106
The sociologists’ quarrel: Small versus Giddings 122	Conclusions 138
Part III Progressive social science, 1896–1914	
5 The liberal revision of American exceptionalism	143
The historical context of liberal exceptionalism 143	Dewey’s pragmatism 162



Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
6	Marginalism and historicism in economics	172
	Marginalist ascendancy 172    Historical economics in alliance with marginalism 186    Liberal historical variations 195 Veblen's historico-evolutionism 204    Conclusions 216	
7	Toward a sociology of social control	219
	Professional convergence 219    Small's Chicago and Giddings' Columbia 224    The liberal exceptionalist sociologies of Ross and Cooley 229    The meanings of social control 247 Conclusions 253	
8	From historico-politics to political science	257
	The liberal historicist challenge 257    Historicism and realism in history and politics 266    Professional division 282    Scientific aspiration in political science 288    Conclusions 297	
Part IV	American social science as the study of natural process, 1908–1929	
9	New models of American liberal change	303
	The historical context of natural process 303    Bentley and Beard's political science 330    Chicago and Columbia sociologies: Thomas, Park, and Chapin 346    From Veblen to institutional economics: Hoxie and Mitchell 371    Conclusions 386	
10	Scientism	390
	The advent of scientism 390    Institutionalism versus neoclassicism in economics 407    The influence of instrumental positivism in sociology 428    Conversion and resistance in political science 448 Conclusions 467	
	Epilogue	471
	Bibliographical note	477
	Indexes	481

## Acknowledgments

Because scholarship is a collaborative effort, I am keenly aware how much this book owes to the work of predecessors and colleagues. I have cited their contributions in my text and footnotes, but I have undoubtedly omitted some intellectual debts incurred over the long course of writing this book. Let me express my general gratitude to the community of scholars and friends whose work, and often personal support, have contributed to this book.

I owe particular thanks to my former colleagues at the University of Virginia, where this book was written, for intellectual stimulation and encouragement. Theodore M. Porter gave the text a searching and skeptical reading and Stephen Innes performed the same service on the early chapters. Richard Rorty, Michael Holt, Mark Thomas, Olivier Zunz, and Joseph Kett read all or part of the manuscript and made very useful suggestions. To the enlightening discussion of the Faculty Seminar on hermeneutics chaired by Ralph Cohen, and to the timely reminders of Erik Midelfort, I owe whatever reflexivity this text has achieved.

I thank equally my other professional associates who commented on the manuscript. Louis Galambos, my new colleague at Johns Hopkins, gave the text a searching and sympathetic reading; Peter Novick, David Hollinger, and Amy Stanley commented extensively on the early chapters; Barbara Laslett read the text with an eye to sociology and gender studies; Howard Seftel did the same for economics; and Donald Dewey read the section on Knight. The book has benefited substantially from the criticisms and suggestions of all my readers, even when I have chosen not to take their advice. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my editor at Cambridge, Frank Smith, for not only improving the text, but for knowing just what to say to allay an author's anxieties.

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

x

*Acknowledgments*

A number of people and institutions have helped in other ways to make this book possible. A large part of the early research was supported by the National Science Foundation, Grant No. SES-7923830, and I am pleased to be able to reward the patience of Ronald Overmann, director of the section on the history and philosophy of science. Some of the later writing and research was supported by the Sesquicentennial Fund of the University of Virginia. To the Library of Congress and the staff of its Stack and Reader Division, I owe special thanks for the opportunity to research and write this book amid the library's splendid resources. The staffs of the libraries I have used to do manuscript research have also been exceedingly helpful. I will single out here only the staff at the University of Chicago Special Collections, Robert Rosenthal, curator, whose riches in the history of American social science required several visits.

Once I started to write, bound to the ancient typewriter, the secretaries at the University of Virginia, Lottie McCauley, Kathleen Miller, and Ella Wood, transcribed the succeeding drafts onto a word processor; I am grateful to them for dedication and good humor beyond the call of duty. My research assistant during the last few years, Charles Evans, ably performed a multitude of tasks.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Stanford G. Ross, for a reading of the text at once skeptical and sympathetic, and most especially, for the satisfactions of our life together, that make this book, and everything else, possible.

Johns Hopkins University

## Abbreviations used in the footnotes

- AAAPSS* Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science  
*AER* American Economic Review  
*AHAAR* American Historical Association Annual Report  
*AHR* American Historical Review  
*AJS* American Journal of Sociology  
*APSR* American Political Science Review  
*ASR* American Sociological Review  
*DAB* Dictionary of American Biography  
*EW* *John Dewey: The Early Works*, 5 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967–75)  
*JAH* Journal of American History  
*JHBS* Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences  
*JHS* Journal of the History of Sociology  
*JHUSHPS* Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science  
*JPE* Journal of Political Economy  
*LW* *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981– )  
*MW* *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, 15 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976–83)  
*PAEA* Publications of the American Economic Association

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

xii

*Abbreviations used in the footnotes*

*PAPSA* Proceedings of the American Political Science Association

*PPASS* Papers and Proceedings of the American Sociological Society

*PSQ* Political Science Quarterly

*QJE* Quarterly Journal of Economics

## Introduction

American social science bears the distinctive mark of its national origin. Like pragmatism or Protestant fundamentalism or abstract expressionism, social science is a characteristic product of modern American culture. Its liberal values, practical bent, shallow historical vision, and technocratic confidence are recognizable features of twentieth-century America. To foreign and domestic critics, these characteristics make American social science ahistorical and scientistic, lacking in appreciation of historical difference and complexity. To its supporters, the drive for scientific method, freedom from the vagaries of history, and practical utility in American society have been praiseworthy goals marred by too-frequent lapses, but they have been equally singled out as its characteristic features. What is so marked about American social science is the degree to which it is modeled on the natural rather than the historical sciences and imbedded in the classical ideology of liberal individualism.

The distinctive character of American social science has necessarily had a profound effect on social practice and social thought in the United States. A historical world is a humanly created one. It is composed of people, institutions, practices, and languages that are created by the circumstances of human experience and sustained by structures of power. History can be used to achieve a critical understanding of historical experience and allows us to change the social structures that shape it. In contrast, the models of the social world that have dominated American social science in the twentieth century invite us to look through history to a presumably natural process beneath. Here the social world is composed of individual behaviors responding to natural stimuli, and the capitalist market and modern urban society are understood, in effect, as part of nature. We are led toward quantitative and technocratic manipulation of nature and an idealized liberal vision

Cambridge University Press  
 052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
 Dorothy Ross  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

of American society. As twentieth-century American culture becomes increasingly disoriented in time and its social ethic becomes increasingly eroded, it behooves us to look closely at this ahistorical strategy.<sup>1</sup>

My focus will be on three core disciplines of American social science – economics, sociology, and political science. I begin in Part I with the origin of the social sciences in eighteenth-century Europe and early nineteenth-century America. These two chapters introduce the historical and conceptual scaffolding from which my argument is constructed and necessarily condense a great deal of material in a small space. The main body of the book, proceeding at a less demanding pace, is about the formative decades of the social-science disciplines in America, roughly 1870 to 1929. Although they began that period much influenced by German historical models, American social scientists determined by the end of it to orient their disciplines toward natural science. A still higher point of scientific aspiration was reached in the 1950s, when quantitative modeling, systems analysis, functionalism, and behavioral science gained wide currency, but the decision to seek out a natural scientific path and the underlying view of the social-historical world as a realm of natural process had already been forged by the 1920s.

I believe that American social science owes its distinctive character to its involvement with the national ideology of American exceptionalism, the idea that America occupies an exceptional place in history, based on her republican government and economic opportunity. Both this national self-conception and the social sciences themselves emerged from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century effort to understand the character and fate of modern society. The successful establishment of republican institutions and the liberal opportunity guaranteed by a continent of virgin land, Americans believed, had set American history on a millennial course and exempted it from qualitative change in the future. America would forestall the mass poverty and class conflict that modernity appeared to be creating in Britain. Before the Civil War this vision of American exceptionalism drew the social sciences into the national effort to stay the hand of time.

1 Among a large literature of criticism of American social science, I have been most influenced by Kenneth Bock, *The Acceptance of Histories: Toward a Perspective for Social Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956); Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) and *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Warren J. Samuels, "Ideology in Economics," in *Modern Economic Thought*, ed. Sidney Weintraub (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 467–84; William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). See also Peter T. Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987).

*Introduction*

xv

Social scientists found fixed laws of history and nature that would perpetuate established national institutions.

The experience of civil war and rapid industrialization and the decline of religious assurance precipitated a national crisis and forced Americans to an understanding of history in the modern sense: history as a process of continuous, qualitative change, moved and ordered by forces that lay within itself. Under the impact of industrialization and the rise of class conflict, Americans confronted the possibility that the country would follow the same historic course that Europe did and that permanent classes, even socialism, might develop here. As a result, many social scientists revised the idea of American exceptionalism. They argued that the realization of American liberal and republican ideals depended on the same forces that were creating liberal modernity in Europe, on the development of capitalism, democratic politics, and science. America's unique condition did not block the full effects of modernity on this continent, but rather supported it.

Given the long investment in the exceptionalist ideal, however, it is not surprising that the effort to carry America into Western liberal history was not complete or unequivocal. Some social scientists had some success in the effort to orient their studies toward history. There would be less interest in drawing the scientific trajectory of mainstream social science if there had not been from the beginning an alternative impulse, occasionally working beneath the surface or in open conflict with mainstream patterns. But the main body of social scientists tried to carve out within or beneath history a realm of nature that would ward off the lingering fears of decline and insure the realization of a harmonious liberal society sometime in the future. In this liberal model history acted within a narrow range and to the extent it opened America to change it triggered the fear of change, as well, so that many social scientists hastened to subject history to scientific control.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the rapid development of industrial society, the deepening response to change, and then the experience of World War I led to a new sense of discontinuity with the past and to accelerating historical transformation. Under those conditions, American social scientists sought harder kinds of technological control. They invented pluralist, behaviorist, and statistical models of a liberal world in perpetual flux, yet perpetually recreating its American form. As the past receded, the dismaying uncertainties of history were transmuted into controllable processes of nature.

To explain the scientific and liberal stance of American social science by examining Americans' understanding of history and response to historical change may seem a roundabout procedure. There are rough and ready answers closer at hand. American social scientists have been apt to see the



scientific aspiration of American social science as merely an outgrowth of the original scientific impulse of the social sciences. But a glance across time and national boundaries shows us that science could take different forms in dealing with sociohistorical events. In the eighteenth century and a good part of the nineteenth, science was loosely understood as systematic natural knowledge, and its models of scientific method ranged from the inductive-deductive method of Newton to the critical philology of Herder and the Göttingen Gelehrten. Various species of historico-evolutionary empiricism were added to the list with Comte, Spencer, and Darwin. All these models were available to American social scientists, and from the early nineteenth century they found points of attraction across the entire range. More critical demands were made upon scientific method toward the end of the nineteenth century, but these new scientific standards did not foreordain the result. The ancient rule that method be appropriate to its subject matter continued to leave wide room for interpretation, especially when the subject matter of the social sciences was – and had been from the outset – history itself. The particular kind of scientific stance American social scientists chose cannot be explained without resort to their particular kind of historical consciousness.

Another frequent explanation for the distinctive characteristics of American social science is that they simply mirror the unique characteristics of American society. American social science is uniformly liberal because American society and political culture are uniformly liberal. American social science is practical and technocratic because its citizens are practical democrats and value technology. As against the latter we will see that American social science was not developed by practical Yankees, but by an increasingly academic class, rooted in moral philosophy, and committed to the values of an elite segment of American society. If they were concerned with practical power, it was because they generally felt themselves somewhat distant from it.

The liberal interpretation of American society and politics likewise misses the complexities of American experience. American liberal thinkers, most notably Louis Hartz, have urged that American political culture was wholly liberal from its inception and defined liberalism as acquisitive individualism. American exceptionalism rested on its liberal character, for the absence of feudalism led to the absence of socialism and locked American politics into liberal consensus.<sup>2</sup> I argue in this book, however, that the consensual framework of American politics that developed in the late eighteenth and

<sup>2</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955).

*Introduction*

xvii

early nineteenth century formed out of the intersection of Protestant, republican, and liberal ideas around the idea of America. Inscribed in that national ideology were not only liberal market values, but Protestant and republican ambivalence toward capitalist development and historical change. It created not a stable liberal consensus, but a continuing quarrel with history. The exceptionalist framework stimulated, as well as contained, conflict and its power of containment was repeatedly tested and defended. If socialism did not develop in America as a major political force, industrialization still raised the problem of class conflict and the threat of socialism. Under the pressures of American exceptionalism, the problem and the threat loomed large and shaped the social scientists' liberal response. They redefined the American exceptionalist ideal in wholly liberal terms and read back those terms to the origin of the Republic. The Hartzian view of American experience is itself a product of that liberal revision of American exceptionalism.

Moreover, the uniqueness of American experience among the Western countries has been exaggerated, for each national history has been shaped by the interaction of common and unique factors. The social sciences that developed in the European countries have also had ties to liberalism and have sought to become scientific. But these common factors have been shaped by the historical cultures in which they emerged, so that in each country, the social-science disciplines took on somewhat different political tasks and located themselves somewhat differently between what we in America call the humanities and the natural sciences. German culture was most deeply shaped by historical understanding, and so too the social scientific models of *Wissenschaft* within it, from the liberal Roscher and Weber to the radical Marx and Mannheim. In France, history has shared influence with rational philosophy and positive science, but has continued to shape *les sciences humaines* since the days of Tocqueville and Comte. England, like America, has been less influenced by historical thinking than the continental countries, but also less swayed than the United States by the model of the natural sciences. Independent disciplines of sociology and political science did not arise to join with economics as a distinctly scientific genre of knowledge; instead economics, philosophy, politics, and history largely retained their nineteenth-century alliances as university studies.

These relationships between the Western countries cannot, however, be placed along a single continuum. We will find, for example, that there were similarities between American and continental social science that were lacking in England, similarities that reflected the late nineteenth-century sense of national crisis and concern with historical change that the United States shared with Germany and France. We will also find that the lingering

Cambridge University Press  
 052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
 Dorothy Ross  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

xviii

## Introduction

American desire to escape history that separated its historical consciousness from Europe in the early nineteenth century brought it closer to Europe's modernist historical consciousness in the early twentieth century. To map out the similarities and differences between American and European social science, however, would require another book. Once we see how America's distinctive national ideology and social scientific task emerged from European social science, I will return only occasionally to the comparative context, in order to highlight American developments.

I should make clear, therefore, lest there be any room for doubt, that my examination of the ideology of American exceptionalism is a critique of this idea of American uniqueness, not an endorsement. While claiming to describe the American world as it was, exceptionalism instead distorted that world, providing a simplistic and idealized vision of the United States and exaggerating American uniqueness. The idea of American difference and the ideology of American exceptionalism has nonetheless played an extremely important role in American life and deeply shaped the structure of social and political thought. This ideology has, I believe, made American experience *more* different from that of other countries than would have been the case had Americans developed a more differentiated view of themselves. In this limited sense, I plead guilty to a species of American exceptionalism. But my intention in singling out this ideology for historical critique is to render it less effective in the future.

The approach I have taken to this study is designed to capture a central line of development in American social science, not the whole story of the social sciences in America. It is an attempt to uncover a fundamental and deeply imbedded dynamic in American social science, a dynamic that links it at its core to American history and that becomes visible only when the underlying values and premises of social scientists are surveyed over a long stretch of that history.

My approach is, therefore, that of intellectual history, that kind of intellectual history which seeks to reconstruct the discourse within which social scientists worked.<sup>3</sup> I understand discourse as conversation, developed over time, centering around certain problems, setting the terms of discussion for those who enter into it, and at the same time responding to the different

3 My understanding of discourse draws upon J. G. A. Pocock, "The Concept of a Language and the *métier d'historien*: Some Considerations on Practice," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19–38; James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), pts. 1, 2, 4; David Hollinger, "Historians and the Discourse of Intellectuals," in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 42–63.

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

*Introduction*

xix

intentions of participants. Discourses are numerous and overlapping, though I will confine the term here to the disciplinary traditions of discussion that grew up around the problems of modern society, polity, and economy, and to the national discussion of America's exceptional place in history.

Such an approach to intellectual history necessarily reaches out in two directions. A discourse is composed of a language, a special idiom or rhetoric, and of acts of utterance by those who participate in it. Hence we can distinguish between the language of a discourse and the way it is actually spoken. A language provides a distinctive logic and rhetorical armory, hence a particular set of possibilities and limitations. But it may be used to express different ideas, it may be used for tactical purposes, and it may produce effects on its participants and audience other than the ones intended. Discourse understood in this way also reaches out to the contexts in which language is formed and propagates. Language emerges from life and orients people to living; it is not separable from the history that surrounds it. The problems that provoked the conversation of American social scientists and the intentions they pursued in that conversation arose from the disciplinary and historical contexts within which they lived. The focus on discourse will therefore lead me to situate their language in the economic, political, and social institutions that formed their historical world. On occasion we will find that a spoken language becomes the ideology of a political class, discipline, or profession.

I have presented social scientific discourse by focusing on the leading figures who, at each historical juncture, carry the discourse forward. They are the people who have grappled closely with the problems their discourse set for them and emerged with characteristic or revealing resolutions of those problems. Often, though not always, they have been the most influential figures in their own or later generations. At each juncture I have tried to present as many voices as are necessary – and only as many as are necessary – to show the major lines of advance, some significant variations, and occasionally, the exceptional person who proves the rule. As the story moves into the twentieth century and the social sciences enlarge, the cast of characters inevitably becomes more selective and incomplete. My selection has been informed by reading a great deal, but by no means all, of what American social scientists wrote during these years, and aided by a rich body of secondary studies. By and large, I have chosen to critique the standard canon of American social science by analyzing the standard canon, rather than enlarging it, although I have noted carefully where the boundaries have been set.

In defining economics, sociology, and political science as the core social sciences, I have not systematically included history, psychology, and an-

thropology, disciplines which have often had a partial allegiance to the social sciences. I have paid considerable attention to the historical discipline because it so thoroughly overlapped the study of politics in the nineteenth century, and because it was centrally concerned in the retreat from history of the other social sciences. I have paid less attention to psychology and anthropology because their origins in the biological sciences and natural history gave them a different set of concerns; during the formative decades of the social sciences in America, they were only partially and indirectly involved in the common discourse about American exceptionalism. I have, however, brought them into my discussion when they become central to the social scientists' discussions. The development of pragmatism by John Dewey and the influence of functional and then behaviorist psychology are treated here as central features of the social scientific discourse. Anthropology played a less prominent role, as a model of critical method, as a support for evolutionary and racial theories, and then through Boasian cultural anthropology, as a solvent of evolutionism.

I should note also that I have, partly for the sake of convenience, used the terms "social science" and "social scientists" as collective terms throughout the book for the different traditions and kinds of thinkers with which I am dealing. We can recognize the unitary, though differentiated, phenomenon these terms represent, even though the collective designation did not come into common use until the early twentieth century in the United States. The otherwise specific historical contexts delineated in the book should prevent any anachronistic implications from arising.<sup>4</sup>

Like all the books I consider in these chapters, this book, too, is shaped by the intentions of its author and the discourse to which those purposes are tied. The reconstruction of the past is always a dialogue with the past, whether acknowledged as such or not, and I believe the writing of history has something to gain from pursuing the dialogue more self-consciously. On one level, my purpose in writing this book is relatively simple. As a scholar of American intellectual history, I would like to integrate the study of the social sciences more fully into the study of American culture, so that students of history will find the subject more accessible and so that we can

4 The terms "social science" and "social sciences" emerged in the late eighteenth century as one designation for the new political and moral sciences. At times during the nineteenth century, it was more closely associated with a specific kind of social science – the theory of Charles Fourier or Comte, the remedial work of the British and American social science associations – than with the disciplinary traditions established in the universities. See Peter R. Senn, "The Earliest Use of the Term 'Social Science,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (1958): 568–70; Georg G. Iggers, "Further Remarks about Early Uses of the Term 'Social Science,'" *ibid.*, 20 (1959): 433–6; Fred R. Shapiro, "A Note on the Origin of the Term 'Social Science,'" *JHBS*, 20 (January 1984): 20–2.

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

## Introduction

xxi

consider more carefully just what happened in America when social thought was partially transformed into social science.

My larger purpose, for which I hold out less hope of success, is that by demonstrating the extent to which social scientific choices were rooted in history, I can suggest that those choices are open to reexamination. Social scientists may have had “good reasons” for choosing their scientific path, but they were reasons consistently hemmed in by their historical intentions. Given hindsight, we may find that there are better reasons for choosing differently. My own view is that the separation between history and the social sciences at the turn of the century, and the contemporaneous retreat among historians from their colleagues’ synthetic concerns, were disadvantageous for both history and the social sciences.

These judgments and concerns place this study in sympathy with two movements in American historiography over the past twenty years or so, which partly overlap: one, the effort to use systematic methods and social scientific theory more extensively in historiography; the second, the rise of a vigorous new, left historiography, which has used Marxist theories against the liberal tradition of the American historical profession. These are diverse movements, and I do not feel allegiance to all aspects of them. A fair number of social and social scientific historians are attracted to the natural science model of the social sciences and uncritically try to import it into historiography; some left historians seem to me to sacrifice too much of the complexity and ambiguity of history to theory. But in general, my sympathy with these new directions has led me to regret that so much of twentieth-century social science is historically vacuous and to see how scientism and liberal ideology have interacted to enforce political and ahistorical constraints on social thinking. Part of the professional bargain made in the early twentieth century, after a considerable amount of acrimonious debate, was to let each specialized field of sociohistorical knowledge go its own way. That too was a historical choice.

The largest single intellectual stimulus for this book has come from the work of J. G. A. Pocock. Though it emerged from a different disciplinary and political context than those upon which I was drawing, *The Machiavellian Moment* converged in important ways with those contexts and spoke powerfully to the desire to broaden American intellectual history beyond the confines of conventional liberal interpretation. More important, I recognized in *The Machiavellian Moment* the origin of my social scientists. Pocock’s work gave me the central problem of American social science – the fate of the American Republic in time. It also showed me the historical form that problem took, a discourse that shaped the way Americans experienced history, even as it was reshaped by that experience. In the end, these ideas of

Cambridge University Press  
052142836X - The Origins of American Social Science  
Dorothy Ross  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

xxii

*Introduction*

history and American history sustained me during the long period of composition, for they forced me to grapple, at a deeper level than I had anticipated, with my understanding of the American Republic and the problem of historical relativism. Such grappling is the only answer there is to the historian's endless regress of contextuality. The hermeneutic circle, for all the limitations it places upon knowledge, gives us access to the happenings of history and the experience of life.