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1. Introduction


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1. Introduction

Abstract

Vastly increased research and a sounder technique in history in the nineteenth century had two influences on the social sciences. When an enthusiasm for the records of history was combined with the evolutionary perspective, it often resulted in the search for and the imposition of patterns of development on history in general or on the history of particular subject matters such as economics, politics, morals, or religion. Social scientists looked to history for explanations, in the hope of finding inevitable laws, stages of development, or the forces that moved human society. As historians worked out a critical method for their subject matter which more accurately and justly portrayed the complex record of past events, the social scientists were stimulated to adopt the same approach to their own subject matters. They turned to composing histories instead of creating sciences. To many, economics became the history of economic institutions; political science, the history of political institutions; anthropology, the history of civilizations, societies, and cultures. Psychology was relatively immune to this influence and turned toward an experimental method. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Social Science, Evolution, Economics, Politics, Morals, Religion, Anthropology, Psychology

Disciplines

Anthropology | Economics | History | Intellectual History | Political Science | Psychology | Social History | Sociology

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXI: Meaning in the Social Sciences](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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XXI. MEANING IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

1. Introduction

In the chapter on the eighteenth century Enlightenment, we saw the beginning of the contemporary social sciences of psychology, economics, and political science. The method of these sciences was the deduction of laws from axioms or propositions made from observations, however limited, of human experience; the goal was a deductive, universal, necessary system of truth. Succeeding chapters showed the application of the conclusions reached in these sciences to economic and political affairs. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the method, goal, and conclusions of the eighteenth century science of man were the predominant ideas animating the social sciences and the accepted economic, political, and moral doctrines.

In Chapter XV we saw the impact of biology and Darwin's idea of evolution upon men's minds and upon the new social sciences of anthropology and sociology. Biology and evolution gave a new orientation to the social sciences and a set of new conceptions and premises that have continued to influence them to the present day. First, the universe, man, and society were conceived as changing and growing processes and not as static and fixed constructions. Time and change were distinctive characteristics of all subject matters. Investigation of the scientific processes of change in man and his institutions became a part of every science. Second, biology, psychology and anthropology were placed in a prominent position rather than physics and mathematics. Man was an organism acting in the context of the physical and social environment. The relation between man and his environment was a complex system of action and reaction. Third, the naturalistic and humanistic attitudes were reinforced. Man, more than ever before, was placed directly in nature as one of its products and species, subject to all natural laws, and to be studied by the natural sciences. Some stressed the part that man played in directing and controlling evolutionary change. For them, the selection of goals and values became of the utmost importance. Fourth, knowledge was looked at from a new perspective. It was a specific form of biological adaptation; man's keenest instrument for the successful maintenance of life. Knowledge, ideas, science were seen as subject to change and development. The aspects of tentativity and relativity received increased attention.

There were, however, short-range influences of evolution and biology that produced some striking theories which had their heyday in the nineteenth century. Chapter XV described in some detail the theory of social Darwinism as expressed by Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. The social scientists borrowed biology's categories of the struggle for existence, natural selection and the survival of the fittest, and interpreted the activities of races, groups, and institutions through them, ignoring the possibility of differences between social and organic evolution and the possibility of other categories. The conception of social organism was borrowed from biology and made the basis of many economic, political, and social theories. Society and the state were conceived as genuine living organisms forming a unity of functioning cells. The attempts to elaborate on this analogy forced the theorist into certain patterns of thought, to the neglect of the study of society, the state, and the economy as it actually existed and functioned. Theories of the evolutionary development of civilizations and institutions were created. Sociologists and anthropologists especially worked out schemes showing the stages of social and cultural development, and using fragmentary evidence of customs and ideas taken from different times, places, and cultures. Herbert Spencer's system of the evolution of civilization is an illustration of this type of approach. The theories of social Darwinism, social organism, and evolutionary development were still in the spirit of the eighteenth century ideal of science as a universal, necessary system of truth and the deductive method.

Vastly increased research and a sounder technique in history in the nineteenth century had two influences on the social sciences. When an enthusiasm for the records of history was combined with the evolutionary perspective, it often resulted in the search for and the imposition of patterns of development on history in general or on the history of particular subject matters such as economics, politics, morals, or religion. Social scientists looked to history for explanations, in the hope of finding inevitable laws, stages of development, or the forces that moved human society. As historians worked out a critical method for their subject matter which more accurately and justly portrayed the complex record of past events, the social scientists were stimulated to adopt the same approach to their own subject matters. They turned to composing histories instead of creating sciences. To many, economics became the history of economic institutions; political science, the history of political institutions; anthropology, the history of civilizations, societies, and cultures. Psychology was relatively immune to this influence and turned toward an experimental method.

The growth of psychology as an experimental science toward the end of the nineteenth century seemed to provide a new orientation for the social sciences. Since the evolutionary and historical approaches had proven inadequate for the social sciences as sciences, and since the conception of human nature was for

them a fundamental one, psychology was looked to for aid. It was hoped that a sound psychology could be made the basis for theory and laws in economics, political science, anthropology, and sociology. However, at first, the social sciences either returned to the psychology of the Enlightenment, as in the case of economics, or they selected certain very hypothetical conclusions of the newer psychology and proceeded to build systems around them. In sociology, for example, the factors of sympathy and imitation were isolated and made key explanatory principles by which all social phenomena could be explained. When the irrational aspect of human behavior received attention, sociologists based their systems upon particular instincts such as sex or "the herd," or upon a number of instincts which were used to explain the actions of men.

As psychology matured as an experimental science, the instinct theory was rejected for more complex theories of the motivation of behavior. Each of the social sciences has had to reconstruct its theories and hypotheses in the light of the revised concept of man offered by such theories. They have had to recognize that human beings are creatures of impulse, passion, emotional preference, and habit, as well as reason; that each man is an individual with different hereditary capacities and attitudes, and a personality which is a unique synthesis; and that men are largely the product of their society and culture. The influence of anthropology, sociology, and history in directing attention to the last factor illustrates the growing impact of the social sciences upon each other.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth the social sciences had accumulated impressive collections of factual information and devised innumerable concepts, hypotheses, and theories, but had discovered few, if any, verified laws. This situation generated a critical and discriminating attitude among social scientists which directed their efforts to two tasks: the gathering of more facts and the investigation of methods of analysis. The first task usually took the form of detailed and specific inquiries into small areas of research, in the hope that accuracy and completeness could be attained, and that causal laws or correlations might be more easily found. The second task has resulted in creating a new subject, methodology, within each of the social sciences. Certain general trends can be discerned in this subject. No one science, such as physics or biology, is singled out as a model; instead different areas of inquiry are believed to require differing intellectual instruments. Hypotheses and theories are held extremely tentatively and suggested only if there is the possibility of testing them by the available data. There is an emphasis on experimental procedure, both narrowly conceived, as in the use of control groups, and more broadly in the sense of historical similarities. A constant attempt is made to present data in quantitative form and to use statistics to find possible correlations between quantitatively stated variables. Finally, there is a return to historical, descriptive studies of human behavior in all fields. These studies modestly hope

to acquaint men with the variables that need to be known and examined, rather than to yield laws of the relationships of variables.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century developments in physics, mathematics, and philosophy have added to the critical and sophisticated attitude of the social scientists. Each of these subjects has emphasized the creative role of the thinker in constructing concepts and theories, and the effect of the observer upon what is being observed. Mathematicians and logicians have devised a variety of deductive systems. Philosophers, working in the fields of semantics, logic, and the philosophy of science, have made men aware of the complex problems inherent in the process of inquiry into every subject matter. The philosophical movements known as pragmatism, logical empiricism, and analysis have vividly demonstrated that men continue to give different answers to the question, "What is scientific knowledge?"

The social sciences have been confronted with a particular form of the above question. Are they to be classed as sciences or studies? The crux of this question seems to be whether the physical sciences are to be taken as the model of science. If they are, then such procedures as exact quantitative measurement, laboratory experiments, and the formulation of laws which yield prediction are necessary characteristics of science. Judged by these criteria, psychology is the only subject which could be classed even partially as a science. However, if we mean by science the use of careful methods of observation and classification, the use of statistics, the construction of hypotheses and theories to organize and direct research, and the ability to make predictions characterized by probability, then we would class them as sciences.

This question appears somewhat academic when we become acquainted with the knowledge that does exist in the social sciences, and with their concern for methods of inquiry. Man has expanded his knowledge of himself and his institutions, both in amount and in direction. There is a degree of interrelation of knowledge of subject matters that has not previously existed, and there is a degree of application of the knowledge gained that affects every aspect of our lives. Representatives of each of the social sciences are employed in all branches of government, industry, business, foundations, and educational institutions. A new question has occurred in our day: If the social sciences do allow us to control the direction of change, what goals are to be selected and who selects them? In other words, values or ethics, which had been divorced from the social sciences, now appear crucial.

This introduction has concentrated on the general characteristics and problems of the social sciences. The following sections on economics, sociology, and psychology offer specific information on these three subjects. Political science and anthropology have been omitted only for reasons of time and space.