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*Edited by*

THEODORE M. PORTER  
DOROTHY ROSS



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# CONTENTS

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	page xvii
<i>General Editors' Preface</i>	xxiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxvii
<b>1 Introduction: Writing the History of Social Science</b>	<b>1</b>
THEODORE M. PORTER AND DOROTHY ROSS	
PART I. SCIENCES OF THE SOCIAL TO THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY	
<b>2 Genres and Objects of Social Inquiry, from the Enlightenment to 1890</b>	<b>13</b>
THEODORE M. PORTER	
The "Sciences of Man" in the Early Modern Period	14
Enlightenment Sciences of Economy, Population, and State	16
Enlightenment Sciences of Minds, Bodies, and Cultures	20
Social Science in an Age of Revolution, 1789–1830	22
The Management of Social and Economic Change, 1830–1880	26
Naturalism and Anti-naturalism in Social Science	33
Disciplined Interventions: Professionals and Reformers	38
<b>3 Social Thought and Natural Science</b>	<b>40</b>
JOHAN HEILBRON	
Naturalism and Moral Philosophy	40
Natural Science and Social Thought	42
The Scientific Model of Moral and Political Theory	43
Physical and Physiological Models	45
Evolutionary Thought	50
A Differential Epistemology	52
Culturalism and Social Science	55

<b>4</b>	<b>Cause, Teleology, and Method</b>	57
	STEPHEN TURNER	
	Two Models of Law	58
	Teleology during the Enlightenment	60
	The Replacement of Teleology	61
	Teleology in Its Many Forms	64
	The Organic Analogy	65
	Decision and Intentionality: Weber and the Marginalists	67
	The Persistence of Teleology	69
<b>5</b>	<b>Utopian Socialism and Social Science</b>	71
	ANTOINE PICON	
	The Enlightenment Legacy	72
	The Prophets of a New Golden Age	74
	Classes, History, and Social Science	75
	Toward a Religion of Humanity	77
	Reshaping Education, Family, and Sexuality	78
	Social Experiments and Failures	80
<b>6</b>	<b>Social Surveys in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries</b>	83
	EILEEN JANES YEO	
	Population Surveys, Ancient and Modern	84
	Social Statistics and Thoroughgoing Enthusiasm, 1830–1850	87
	Some Episodes of Contestation	90
	Midcentury Expertise and the Working Classes	93
	International Competition/International Comparison, 1880–1915	95
	Women and Social Surveys	96
	Professionalization versus Community Self-Study	98
<b>7</b>	<b>Scientific Ethnography and Travel, 1750–1850</b>	100
	HARRY LIEBERSOHN	
	Networks of Knowledge	101
	Narratives of Knowledge	104
	Comparative Methods	108
<b>8</b>	<b>History and Historicism</b>	113
	JOHNSON KENT WRIGHT	
	The Eighteenth Century: Preconditions	114
	The Rankean Revolution: Classical Historicism	120
	The Later Nineteenth Century: Diffusion and Development	124
<b>9</b>	<b>Bringing the Psyche into Scientific Focus</b>	131
	JAN GOLDSTEIN	
	The Preeminence of Sensationalist Psychology	133
	The Mesmeric Counterpoint	139
	The Psychological Playing Field according to Auguste Comte	142

	Cousinian Psychology in European Context	143
	The Persistence of Sensationalism: Associationist Psychology in Nineteenth-Century Britain	146
	Phrenology: A Psyche for the Masses	149
<b>10</b>	<b>Continental Political Economy from the Physiocrats to the Marginal Revolution</b>	<b>154</b>
	KEITH TRIBE	
	<i>Économie politique</i> as the Natural Law of Conduct	155
	Jean-Baptiste Say: Economy and Government	162
	From Human Needs to the Formation of Prices	164
	From Classicism to Neoclassicism	167
<b>11</b>	<b>British Economic Theory from Locke to Marshall</b>	<b>171</b>
	MARGARET SCHABAS	
	The Eighteenth Century	172
	Population and Economic Scarcity	175
	Classical Political Economy	176
	John Stuart Mill	179
	The Marginal Revolution	180
<b>12</b>	<b>Marx and Marxism</b>	<b>183</b>
	TERRELL CARVER	
	<i>Wissenschaft</i>	183
	Synthesis	185
	Critique	187
	Practice	190
	Method	193
	Science	195
	Theory	197
	Renewal	201
 PART II. THE DISCIPLINES IN WESTERN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA SINCE ABOUT 1880		
<b>13</b>	<b>Changing Contours of the Social Science Disciplines</b>	<b>205</b>
	DOROTHY ROSS	
	Disciplinary Formation, 1870–1914	208
	Between Science and the Humanities	214
	The Social Sciences between the Wars	218
	Crossing Borders in Interwar Social Science	224
	Social Science in Ascendancy, 1945–1970	229
	The Social Science Project Challenged, 1970–2000	234
<b>14</b>	<b>Statistics and Statistical Methods</b>	<b>238</b>
	THEODORE M. PORTER	
	Estimation and Error	239
	Statistical Models of Regularity and Variation	240

	Statistical Mathematics: Correlations and Regressions	242
	Statistical Mathematics: Surveys and Samples	246
	Statistical Mathematics and Experimental Design	247
	The Statistical Ethos in Social Science	249
<b>15</b>	<b>Psychology</b>	251
	MITCHELL G. ASH	
	Routes to Institutionalization, 1850–1914: England and France	252
	Routes to Institutionalization, 1850–1914: Germany and the United States	255
	Common Features of the “New” Psychology	260
	Competing “Schools” as Cultural Constructs, 1910–1945	262
	Dynamics of Professionalization to 1945	267
	The Postwar Era: “Americanization” and the Alternatives	269
	Conclusion: Science, Practice, Subjectivity	273
<b>16</b>	<b>Economics</b>	275
	MARY S. MORGAN	
	Economics as Engineering	276
	Economics from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century	278
	Measuring the Economy	281
	Mathematizing Economics	283
	Modeling and Tool-Based Economics	286
	The Contingencies of Economic History and Economic Responsibility	288
	“Solving” the Great Depression: New Economics, New Expertise, and New Technologies	290
	The Feedback from Economic Engineering to Historical Events	293
	The Ideological Turn in American Economics	295
	Tools and Economic Science	298
	The Nexus of Tools, Science, and Ideology	301
	Conclusion: The Dynamics of the Economics Discipline	305
<b>17</b>	<b>Political Science</b>	306
	JAMES FARR	
	The Disciplining of Political Studies, to 1890	307
	State and Pluralism Theorized, 1890–1920	309
	A “New Science” of Politics, 1920–1945	315
	Behavioralism and Democracy’s Critics, 1945–1970	320
	Democratic Prospects and the Postbehavioral Condition, from 1970	326
<b>18</b>	<b>Sociology</b>	329
	ROBERT C. BANNISTER	
	The Founders, 1830s–1860s	331
	Organicism and Evolutionism, 1870s–1890s	332
	Statistics and Social Investigation, 1830–1930	334

	The “Classical” Era, 1890s–1910s	336
	Interwar Years	344
	International Revival and American Hegemony, 1945–1960	348
	The 1960s and After	352
<b>19</b>	<b>Anthropology</b>	354
	ADAM KUPER	
	The Evolution of Culture and Society	355
	Diffusionism	360
	Fieldwork	362
	Varieties of Functionalism: Anthropology as a Social Science	363
	Anthropology, Colonialism, Development	369
	Reactions to Functionalism: Anthropology and the Humanities	371
	New Directions	374
<b>20</b>	<b>Geography</b>	379
	MARIE-CLAIRE ROBIC	
	The Institutionalization of Geography and National Education	380
	The Globe, the Colonial Divide, and the “Finite” World	382
	A Synthesis between Earth Sciences and Human Sciences	383
	Geography: A Social Science of Spatial Organization	386
	New Challenges: The Global System, the Locality, the Environment	388
<b>21</b>	<b>History and the Social Sciences</b>	391
	JACQUES REVEL	
	The Problem Posed	391
	Three Answers	392
	The Rise of <i>Annales</i> History	396
	American Experience Compared	399
	Since the 1960s: Marx and the Social Sciences	401
	The Problem Reassessed	403
PART III. THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES		
<b>22</b>	<b>The Sciences of Modernity in a Disparate World</b>	407
	ANDREW E. BARSHAY	
<b>23</b>	<b>The Social Sciences in Latin America during the Twentieth Century</b>	413
	JORGE BALAN	
	Prologue: Positivism and Social Evolution in Latin American Thought	413
	From the Turn of the Century to the 1930s: Education and Nation Building	415

	Between World War II and the 1970s: Development and Underdevelopment	421
	The End of the Century: Higher Education and Thematic Diversification	428
	Latin American Social Sciences in a Globalized World	429
<b>24</b>	<b>Psychology in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe</b>	431
	JAROMÍR JANOUŠEK AND IRINA SIROTKINA	
	Russian Psychology between Neurophysiology and the Humanities	432
	Psychology and Society	435
	Remaking Human Nature	437
	Psychological Theory and Marxism	439
	Psychology and Austromarxism	444
	The Search for National Identity in Central and Eastern Europe	446
<b>25</b>	<b>Sociology in Egypt and Morocco</b>	450
	ALAIN ROUSSILLON	
	The Accumulation of Knowledge for the Other	451
	In Morocco: Muslim Sociology and Pacification	452
	In Egypt: Intellectual Renaissance through Social Science	454
	Nationalization of the Social Sciences: The Invention of the Sociologist	458
	In Morocco: The Initial Production of a Critical Sociology	458
	In Egypt: To Revolutionize Sociology?	461
	Sociologists in Crisis in Egypt and Morocco	463
<b>26</b>	<b>The Social Sciences in Africa</b>	466
	OWEN SICHONE	
	The Colonial Legacy	467
	Bourgeois Economics, Development Economics, and Political Economy	472
	Political Science and the Postcolonial State	475
	Sociology and Sociocultural Anthropology	477
	From National Universities to Regional Research Networks	479
<b>27</b>	<b>The Social Sciences in India</b>	482
	PARTHA CHATTERJEE	
	Colonial Origins	482
	Nationalist Constructions	485
	Social Science in Independent India	490
<b>28</b>	<b>The Social Sciences in China</b>	498
	BETTINA GRANSOW	
	Native Domains of Learning and the Early Reception of the Western Social Sciences	499
	Institutionalization of the Disciplines	501



	Strategies to Sinicize the Social Sciences during the 1930s	504
	The Social Sciences in Taiwan and Hong Kong	507
	Reconstitution of the Social Sciences in the People's Republic of China	509
<b>29</b>	<b>The Social Sciences in Japan</b>	<b>515</b>
	ANDREW E. BARSHAY	
	Neo-Traditionalism and the Hegemony of the Particular	515
	Toward Pluralization: The Liberal Challenge	520
	Radical Social Science: The Impact and Fate of Marxism	524
	Postwar Social Science: Modernism and Modernization	527
	From Science to Culture	531
PART IV. SOCIAL SCIENCE AS DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE		
<b>30</b>	<b>The Uses of the Social Sciences</b>	<b>537</b>
	PETER WAGNER	
	The Uses of the Theoretical Traditions	538
	The Demand for Empirical Social Knowledge	539
	States, Professions, and the Transformation of Liberalism	541
	Knowledge Forms of Mass Democracy and Industrial Capitalism (I): The Transformation of the Epistemic Constellation	543
	Knowledge Forms of Mass Democracy and Industrial Capitalism (II): The Breakthrough of a Policy Orientation in the Social Sciences	544
	Transformative Moments: Wars, External and Internal	547
	The Crisis of Useful Social Knowledge: Critique, Retreat, and Refinement	549
	Persistent Variation, Persistent <i>Problématiques</i>	551
<b>31</b>	<b>Managing the Economy</b>	<b>553</b>
	ALAIN DESROSIÈRES	
	<i>L'Etat ingénieur</i> : Production and People	554
	The Liberal State: Exchange and Prices	557
	The Welfare State: Protecting Workers	558
	The Keynesian State: Decomposing Global Demand	560
	The French and Dutch Plans Compared	561
	The New Liberal State: Polycentrism and Incentives	563
<b>32</b>	<b>Management and Accounting</b>	<b>565</b>
	PETER MILLER	
	Individualizing Efficiency	567
	Linking Costs to Decisions	569
	Making the Future Calculable	572

<b>33</b>	<b>Polling in Politics and Industry</b>	577
	SUSAN HERBST	
	Political Polling in Nineteenth-Century America	578
	Birth of the Sample Survey	580
	European Developments	585
	American Academic Survey Institutes	586
	The Use of Polls to Influence Public Opinion	587
	Polling, Persuasion, and Democracy	588
<b>34</b>	<b>Social Science and Social Planning during the Twentieth Century</b>	591
	PETER WAGNER	
	Ameliorist Social Science and the Social Question	592
	Social Science and the Crisis of Liberalism	593
	Social Planning in Mass Society: The First Attempt	595
	Planning and Freedom: The Social Philosophy of Planning	601
	A Synthesis of Sorts: The Second Attempt at Social Planning	603
	After the Planning Euphoria	606
<b>35</b>	<b>Social Welfare</b>	608
	ELLEN FITZPATRICK	
	Systematizing Social Inquiry	608
	Social Work as Social Science	612
	From Social Insurance to Welfare	616
<b>36</b>	<b>Education</b>	621
	JULIE A. REUBEN	
	Education and the Philosophic Tradition	622
	Education and the Development of the Social Sciences	623
	Declining Interest in Education	628
	Renewed Interest in Education	630
	Continuing Ties?	633
<b>37</b>	<b>The Culture of Intelligence</b>	635
	JOHN CARSON	
	From Talents to Intelligence	635
	IQ: Making Intelligence a Thing	637
	Intelligence as a Tool	641
	Intelligence in an Environmentalist Context	644
	Conclusion: The IQ Debates, Social Policy, and the Return of Biology	646
<b>38</b>	<b>Psychologism and the Child</b>	649
	ELLEN HERMAN	
	In the American Grain	650
	From Elite Patronage to State Support	653
	Childhood Becomes Psychological	655
	From Science to Help: The Gender of Psychologism	660

<b>39</b>	<b>Psychiatry</b>	663
	ELIZABETH LUNBECK	
	The Rise of Dynamic Psychiatry	665
	Biological Psychiatry	670
	Culture and Personality	673
<b>40</b>	<b>Gender</b>	678
	ROSALIND ROSENBERG	
	The Age of Evolution: The Late Nineteenth Century	678
	Seeds of Doubt	680
	Hereditarian Rejoinders	684
	The Rebirth of Feminism: Erasing Color and Sex in the 1950s and 1960s	687
	From Sex to Gender in the Social and Behavioral Sciences, 1970s to the Present	689
<b>41</b>	<b>Race and the Social Sciences</b>	693
	ELAZAR BARKAN	
	The Invention of Race	694
	Scientific Racism	695
	From Biology to Culture	700
	The Politics of Race	705
<b>42</b>	<b>Cultural Relativism</b>	708
	DAVID A. HOLLINGER	
	Franz Boas and the Reaction against Evolutionary Anthropology	711
	Boas's Students and the Development of Cultural Relativism	714
	The Uncertain Legacy of Cultural Relativism	718
<b>43</b>	<b>Modernization</b>	721
	MICHAEL E. LATHAM	
	Social Theory and the Cold War Context	722
	Modernizers and the State	728
	Modernization Theory Under Fire	731
	<i>Index</i>	735

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## INTRODUCTION

### Writing the History of Social Science

*Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross*

How do we write the history of social science? There are problems even with the name. In English alone, “sciences of man,” “moral sciences,” “moral and political sciences,” “behavioral sciences,” and “human sciences” have been among its many predecessors and competitors. Their proliferation reflects the unsettled nature of this broad subject matter. All are capable of giving offense, both by exclusion and by inclusion. Many have long and contradictory histories.

Consider the career of the “moral sciences.” The phrase “*sciences morales et politiques*” was introduced in France about 1770. In 1795 it was enshrined as the official label for the “second class” of the Institut de France (the former Académie des Sciences was the first class), until this nest of critics was reorganized out of existence by Napoleon in 1803. Restored in 1832, the official institution of the moral and political sciences was now suitably conservative, emphasizing philosophy and individual morality. John Stuart Mill, an admirer of Auguste Comte’s “sociology,” included in his enduringly influential 1843 treatise on logic a section aiming to “remedy” the “backward state of the moral sciences” by “applying to them the methods of physical science, duly extended and generalized.” A German translation of Mill’s work rendered “moral sciences” as *Geisteswissenschaften* – not the first use of that German term, but an influential one. It referred to the sciences of *Geist*, which could be translated back into English as “spirit” or “mind.” In German, this remained a standard label until well into the twentieth century. It was understood to indicate that such studies had a moral and spiritual character, quite unlike the sciences of nature.

In French and English, there has been more emphasis on the continuity of scientific knowledge. David Hume, among others, argued in the eighteenth century that politics could be a science. “Political economy,” especially in Enlightenment Scotland, was part of a broad effort to comprehend the moral and historical dimensions of human society. It had gained wide acceptance by the early nineteenth century and was appreciated for

its contribution to the art of governing. The usual German term, “national economy,” evoked this political dimension still more clearly, while the French campaign to replace it with “social economy” implied a certain discontent with mere politics. Such also was the tendency of “social science,” a term that first gained currency in French, having been introduced just prior to the French Revolution. It expressed an increasingly widespread view that politics was conditioned by something deeper. Social science aimed to comprehend the forces of progress and their instabilities in a way that reduced neither to an individualistic, psychological dimension nor to the domain of state and government. In this respect, it provided an enduring model for “scientific” investigation of the human domain.

In English, the “social sciences,” now plural, emerged in the late nineteenth century, above all in the United States, and that umbrella term remains in common use. But any word or phrase presuming to name so disparate an endeavor was bound to create controversy. For a time, it seemed possible that social knowledge would not require such synthetic labels, because it would be united in a single field. This was Comte’s vision for “sociology,” and in the later nineteenth century some envisioned “anthropology” in the same way. More recently, the challenge to “social sciences” has come overwhelmingly from those who would secede from them. Psychologists have been the least happy with that phrase, pressing often to be grouped with the biologists, or, if they had to keep the company of sociologists and anthropologists, insisting at least on a rival adjective. The term “behavioral sciences” gained wide currency in the mid twentieth century in North America, but not in Europe. Indeed, the object of behaviorism can scarcely be called social, and its late-twentieth-century decline in favor of “cognitive” and physiological orientations only accentuated the differences. Neither can economics be described straightforwardly as a social science, and economists often claim a higher standing for their field. “Social, behavioral, and economic sciences” has begun to emerge as a bureaucratic designation. We have only to add “political,” “cultural,” “demographic,” and “historical” to embrace all of those university disciplines lying outside the professional schools that are neither humanities nor sciences of nature nor mathematics. But this is taxonomic splitting run amok.

The French language offers an appealing alternative, the *sciences humaines*, or human sciences. The term dates back at least to the seventeenth century. During the Enlightenment it was more or less synonymous with *sciences de l’homme* (sciences of man), then a very common designation and one that remains acceptable in French, though it has become officially sexist in English. *Sciences humaines* regained its currency in the 1950s, and was particularly favored by Georges Canguilhem and Georges Gusdorf. They used it to refer to a broadly philosophical tradition of inquiry, embodying a humanistic vision that provided an alternative to the work of technocratic specialists who

divide up the human domain – indeed, who carve up *l'homme* himself, the better to manage him.<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault adopted the name, but associated it more darkly with professional and administrative forms of knowledge. The phrase “human science” has spread to English mainly because of Foucault’s extraordinary impact on the academic humanities. Roger Smith used it as the title of a synthetic historical work emphasizing the history of psychology in relation to a wide domain of social thought and investigation.<sup>2</sup> In English, at least, “human science” remains a category of the scholarly observer, mostly unknown to “human scientists,” if such there be. Its provenance is ill defined. Psychology and psychiatry are central to it, along with ethnography. Studies of language, literature, art, and music are often included, and the vast domain of medicine occupies the borderlands. The more mathematical fields, notably economics, are sometimes excluded, ostensibly as inhuman sciences.

Although the term “human science” has its attractions, we have not chosen it for this volume. We have also resisted the temptation to multiply terms. While we recognize, and indeed emphasize, the diversity of the social sciences, we are impressed also by their family resemblances, at least from a cultural and intellectual standpoint. One of the crucial ambitions of this volume is to show what is gained by bringing their histories together, if not in a single narrative, then at least in a group of intersecting essays. So it is not just in order to save ink that our title names its topic with only one adjective. We have chosen “social.”

There is also some question about “science,” which has long been understood to imply a certain standard of experimental or conceptual rigor and of methodological clarity. In English, especially in the twentieth century, the claim to scientific status has meant the assertion of some fundamental resemblance to natural science, usually regarded even by social scientists as the core of “real” science – as temporally prior and logically exemplary. Historically, however, this appears to be something of a misapprehension. Although science has long referred to natural or human knowledge as opposed to revelation, theology had a better claim to the status of science during the Middle Ages than did the study of living things, or even the study of matter in motion. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an assortment of names was used for various branches or aspects of natural knowledge, including “natural philosophy,” “natural history,” “experimental physics,” and “mixed mathematics.” “Science” was too nebulous to be useful, especially in English, until about 1800, when it emerged as the standard name for the organized

<sup>1</sup> Claude Blanckaert, “L’Histoire des sciences de l’homme. Principes et périodisation,” and Fernando Vidal, “La ‘science de l’homme’: Désirs d’unité et juxtapositions encyclopédiques,” in *L’Histoire des sciences de l’homme: Trajectoire, enjeux et questions vives*, ed. Claude Blanckaert, Loïc Blondiaux, Laurent Loty, Marc Renneville, and Nathalie Richard (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), pp. 23–60, 61–78.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Smith, *The Fontana History of the Human Sciences* (London: Fontana Press, 1997). (In the United States, *The Norton History of the Human Sciences*.)