

Social Science from the Turn of the 20th Century

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Science and social science

It is impossible to understand, much less to assess, the social sciences without first understanding what, in general, science is. The word itself conveys little. As late as the 18th century, science was used as a near synonym of art, both meaning any kind of knowledge—though the sciences and the arts could perhaps be distinguished by the former's greater abstraction from reality. Art in this sense designated practical knowledge of how to do something—as in the “art of love” or the “art of politics”—and science meant theoretical knowledge of that same thing—as in the “science of love” or the “science of politics.” But, after the rise of modern physics in the 17th century, particularly in the English-speaking world, the connotation of science changed drastically. Today, occupying on the knowledge continuum the pole opposite that of art (which is conceived as subjective, living in worlds of its own creation), science, considered as a body of knowledge of the empirical world (which it accurately reflects), is generally understood to be uniquely reliable, objective, and authoritative. The change in the meaning of the term reflected the emergence of science as a new social institution—i.e., an established way of thinking and acting in a particular sphere of life—that was organized in such a way that it could consistently produce this type of knowledge.

Also called “modern science”—to distinguish it from sporadic attempts to produce objective knowledge of empirical reality in the past—the institution of science is oriented toward the understanding of empirical reality. That institution presupposes not only that the world of experience is ordered and that its order is knowable but also that the order is worth understanding in its own right. When, as in the European Middle Ages, God was conceived as the only reality worth knowing, there was no place for a consistent effort to understand the empirical world. The emergence of the institution of science, therefore, was predicated on the reevaluation of the mundane vis-à-vis the transcendental. In England the perceived importance of the empirical world rose tremendously with the replacement of the religious consciousness of the feudal society of orders by an essentially secular national consciousness following the 15th-century Wars of the Roses. Within a century of redefining itself as a nation, England placed the combined forces of royal patronage and social prestige behind the systematic investigation of empirical reality, thereby making the institution of science a magnet for intellectual talent.

The goal of understanding the empirical world as it is prescribed a method for its gradual achievement. Eventually called the method of conjecture and refutation, or the scientific method, it consisted of the development of hypotheses, formulated logically to allow for their refutation by empirical evidence, and the attempt to find such evidence. The scientific method

became the foundation of the normative structure of science. Its systematic application made for the constant supersession of contradicted and refuted hypotheses by better ones—whose sphere of consistency with the evidence (their truth content) was accordingly greater—and for the production of knowledge that was ever deeper and more reliable. In contrast to all other areas of intellectual endeavor (and despite occasional deviations) scientific knowledge has exhibited sustained growth. Progress of that kind is not simply a desideratum: it is an actual—and distinguishing—characteristic of science.

There was no progressive development of objective knowledge of empirical reality before the 17th century—no science, in other words. In fact, there was no development of knowledge at all. Interest in questions that, after the 17th century, would be addressed by science (questions about why or how something is) was individual and passing, and answers to such questions took the form of speculations that corresponded to existing beliefs about reality rather than to empirical evidence. The formation of the institution of science, with its socially approved goal of systematic understanding of the empirical world, as well as its norms of conjecture and refutation, was the first, necessary, condition for the progressive accumulation of objective and reliable knowledge of empirical reality.

For the science of matter, physics, the institutionalization of science was also a sufficient condition. But the development of sciences of other aspects of reality—specifically of life and of humanity—was prevented for several more centuries by a philosophical belief, dominant in the West since the 5th century BCE, that reality has a dual nature, consisting partly of matter and partly of spirit.

The mental or spiritual dimension of reality, which for most of this long period was by far the more important, was empirically inaccessible. Accordingly, the emergence of modern physics in the 17th century led to the identification of the material with the empirical, the scientific, and later with the objective and the real. And this identification in turn caused anything nonmaterial to be perceived as ideal, outside the scope of scientific inquiry, subjective, and, eventually, altogether unreal.

That misconception of the nonmaterial placed the study of life and especially the study of humanity—both of whose subjects were undeniably real, though they also evidently contained nonmaterial dimensions—between the horns of a dilemma. Either those tremendously important aspects of reality could not be scientifically approached at all, or they needed to be reduced to their material dimensions, a project that was logically impossible. Both areas of study, consequently, were confined either to the mere collection and cataloging of information that could not be scientifically interpreted (in the case of the study of life, the assignment of “natural history”) or to the formulation of speculations that could not be empirically tested (so

called “theory” as regards humanity). A progressive accumulation of objective knowledge regarding these aspects of empirical reality—a science of such aspects—was beyond reach.

Biology escaped this ontological trap in 1859 with the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. The theory of evolution by means of natural selection, operative throughout all of life and irreducible to any of the laws of physics (though operating within the conditions of those laws and therefore logically consistent with them), allowed life to be characterized as an autonomous reality, breaking through the blinders of psychophysical dualism and adding to reality at least one other colossal dimension: the organic. The realization that its subject matter was autonomous established the study of life as an independent field of scientific inquiry—the science of organic reality. Since then, biology has been progressing by leaps and bounds, building on past achievements and ever improving or replacing biological theories by better ones, able to withstand tests by more empirical evidence.

Social science in the research universities

Biology thus created a way to circumvent the dualist psychophysical ontology—the cognitive obstacle preventing the development of sciences other than the one focusing on material reality, physics—and made scientific activity and knowledge possible regarding nonmaterial empirical reality, which included humanity. The necessary and sufficient conditions for the development of a science of humanity were finally in place. Unfortunately, however, no accumulation of reliable objective knowledge about humanity followed. The reason for that failure was the institutionalization in the United States at the turn of the 20th century of the social sciences as academic disciplines within the newly formed research universities.

In the half-century after the American Civil War (1861–65), the United States rapidly became the most populous and the most prosperous society in the Western world. That prosperity created numerous opportunities for lucrative and prestigious academic careers in the country’s new university establishment, whose immediately robust bureaucracies and graduate departments for professional training were soon the model for other countries to follow. The bureaucratization and departmentalization within the research universities did not affect the development of the exact and natural sciences, which were then already on a firm footing and progressing apace, but it effectively prevented the formation of a science of humanity, erecting a series of obstacles on the way to the accumulation of objective knowledge of that core aspect of empirical reality, instead of facilitating the development of such a science (e.g., by protecting practicing scientists from the pressures of public opinion).

American research universities were generally the creation of two groups: post-Civil War business magnates, who appreciated the possibilities for revolutionizing industrial production opened up by advances in physics and biology and were eager to invest in the development of

science; and elements of the East Coast gentry, the scions of old families who had formed the bulk of the colonial and pre-Civil War traditional cultural elite. The latter group was not intellectually sophisticated and was not much interested in the nature or history of science. Their central concern was the change in the traditional structure of American society that had been brought about by increasing immigration and in particular by the rise, from the less genteel strata of society, of a new business elite—the “new rich,” whom the cultural elite generally derided as “robber barons.” Worried that those changes threatened their own position in society, the traditional elite also believed that great wealth, unconnected to the style of life which had legitimated social status before the Civil War, created numerous social problems and was deleterious to society as a whole. In 1865 some prominent members of the traditional elite formed in Boston the American Association for the Promotion of Social Science (AAPSS), the goal of which, according to the organization’s constitution, was

to aid the development of social science, and to guide the public mind to the best practical means of promoting the amendment of laws, the advancement of education, the prevention and repression of crime, the reformation of criminals, and the progress of public morality, the adoption of sanitary regulations, and the diffusion of sound principles on questions of economy, trade, and finance.

The constitution further declared that the AAPSS

will give attention to pauperism, and the topics related thereto; including the responsibility of the well-endowed and successful, the wise and educated, the honest and respectable, for the failures of others. It will aim to bring together the various societies and individuals now interested in these objects, for the purpose of obtaining by discussion the real elements of truth; by which doubts are removed, conflicting opinions harmonized, and a common ground afforded for treating wisely the great social problems of the day.

Rhetorically, the declaration reasserted the authority of the traditional elite, which the rise of the independent business elite had largely undermined. Wisdom and education were equated with honesty and respectability, and wise and educated members of the AAPSS, it was implied, were already in possession of social science—they already knew, prior to any research, the sound principles upon which the great questions of economy, trade, finance, and the responsibilities of the business classes should be based. In that context, “social science” was not an open-ended process of accumulation of objective knowledge of empirical reality by means of logically formulated conjectures subject to refutation by contradictory evidence. Rather, it was a form of political advocacy, practiced and supported by those who considered themselves possessed of a special insight and capable of “obtaining by discussion the real elements of truth.” In other words, the “science” the AAPSS sought to foster was an ideology.

The preoccupations of social science so conceived, as indicated in the AAPSS constitution, ranged from “pork as an article of food” to the management of insane asylums. From the start, however, two areas dominated: “economy, trade, and finance”—including national debt, industrial relations, and related topics, reflecting the economic focus of the gentry’s social criticism—and education, including the “relative value of classical and scientific instruction in schools and colleges.” Here “scientific instruction” referred to instruction in the physical sciences (biology having barely begun), which was relatively new, while classical instruction was what the members of the traditional elite had received in their own schools and colleges. The latter form of education had lost some of its prestige as a result of the demonstrated success of the business magnates, most of whom had received no formal education at all. The elite’s insistence on the social importance of such (nonscientific) education was thus connected to its need to protect its status.

Within a year the AAPSS merged with the American Social Science Association (a subsidiary of the Massachusetts Board of Charities), also formed in 1865. The leading patrician reformers—the ASSA’s officers—included three future research-university presidents, who would play a major role in the creation of these new institutions. Social scientists capitalized on the uncultured businessmen’s interest in natural science and harnessed it to their specific status concerns: offering their cooperation in developing institutions for the promotion of science, they established themselves as authorities over how far the definition of science would reach. By the time of the founding of the first research university, Johns Hopkins, in 1876, it was thoroughly in the interests of those who identified themselves as social scientists to be generally recognized as members of the scientific profession, alongside physicists and biologists. In the wake of the Darwinian revolution in biology, the prestige of science among the educated classes had skyrocketed, quickly catching up with the respect commanded by religion and indeed leaving it behind. Science was emerging as the preeminent intellectual and even moral authority within American society, and it was only natural for social scientists (many of whom, incidentally, were clergymen) to wish to share in the authority it afforded.

That desire was evident in two developments that followed closely on the heels of the founding of Johns Hopkins: the division of “social science” into “disciplines” and efforts to model those disciplines on physics. The latter development helped to establish as virtually unquestionable the twin beliefs that (1) the basis of the scientific method, what made science objective, was quantification, and, accordingly, that (2) the degree of scientific legitimacy possessed by a discipline corresponded to the volume of quantitative text it produced (i.e., the extent to which quantitative symbols were used in its publications).

The first social science to be institutionalized as an academic discipline within the research universities was history—specifically, economic history. Many social scientists from patrician

American families had spent time in German universities, in whose liberal arts faculties history had already emerged as a highly respectable profession; the first American university professors were thus encouraged to see themselves as historians. In its turn, the economic focus of the new historians reflected the old target of their social criticism. In 1884, only eight years after the founding of Johns Hopkins, American historians held their first annual convention, where they formed a professional organization, the American Historical Association (AHA). During the AHA's meeting in 1885, some historians left the AHA to form the American Economic Association (AEA). Several years later, a group of the first American economists left the AEA to form the American Political Science Association (APSA). And in 1905, some of those political scientists, who had earlier identified as economists and before that considered themselves historians, quit the APSA to form the American Sociological Society (ASS), now called the American Sociological Association (ASA). Thus, by the very early 20th century, it could be said that an association of gentry activists and social critics, affiliated with a charitable organization, had spawned four academic disciplines, splitting social science into history, economics, political science, and sociology.

The relatively spontaneous fission of social science was different in character from specialization within physics and biology. Scientific specialization was prompted by developments in the understanding of the subject matter: anomalies in earlier theories contradicted by evidence, the raising of new questions, or the discovery of previously unknown causal factors. It accompanied the advancement of objective knowledge of empirical reality and contributed to its further progress. The break-up of "social science" into separate disciplines, in contrast, was driven not by scientific necessity but primarily by the desire of social scientists and research-university administrators to create additional career opportunities for themselves and their associates. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the cart was placed before the horse.

The first step in that scientifically backward process was the foundation of professional associations. The existence of professional associations ostensibly justified the establishment of university departments in which the declared but undefined professions would be practiced and new generations of professionals trained. Such associations, however, mostly contributed to bureaucratization and served vested interests, doing little to advance any genuine understanding of humanity. Two more professions with longer histories, anthropology and psychology (both of which were independent of social criticism and largely unconcerned with the threat to the status of traditional elites posed by the uncultured rich) were incorporated within academic social sciences during this formative period. In neither case did their incorporation accurately reflect their already developed professional identities, but it did not interfere with their intellectual agendas and was accepted.

The identities and agendas of the three disciplines that arose from history in the research university— economics, political science, and sociology—were to develop within that also nascent institutional environment, which, like them, was in large measure brought into being by the desire of the traditional elite to re-establish its political and cultural authority. That environment attracted to the new social sciences people actuated by three quite independent motives, which would be the source of persistent confusion regarding the identity and agenda of each of those disciplines. To begin with, the conviction of the original American social scientists that they, better than anyone else, knew how society should be organized—that they, as experts on questions of the general good and social justice, were wielders of moral authority and should be natural advisors to policy makers—persisted even after social science split into economics, political science, and sociology. The desire to be treated as the wielders of such authority, as natural leaders of society, was the first motive.

All three disciplines continued to attract people who were interested not so much in understanding reality but in changing it, to paraphrase Marx's famous thesis. However, such authority no longer could be claimed on the basis of a genteel lifestyle: with science successfully competing with religion as the source of certain knowledge and even ultimate meaning, what was now required was being recognized as scientists. Accordingly, the emphasis in social science shifted from "social" to "science," and, as noted above, the term was understood to mean "like physics (and biology)" rather than "any kind of knowledge." The desire for the status of scientists, specifically, was the second independent motive that attracted people to the social sciences.

That motive was also the main reason behind the rise of the discipline of economics. Economics was explicitly modeled on physics (mainly in its use of quantification to express its ideas), reflecting the general ambition among would-be economists to hold with regard to society the position that physicists (and biologists) had held with regard to the natural world. Yet, social scientists knew exceedingly little about natural science and the nature of science beyond the fact that physics and biology were producing authoritative knowledge of their subject matters. They had a very limited understanding of what the authority of that knowledge was based on. As outside observers, it appeared to them (as it did to others) that scientific practice characteristically involved the use of numbers and algorithms—an esoteric language of expression. They concluded—in sharp contrast to the emerging humanistic discipline of philosophy of science, which focused on the scientific method of investigation and inference—that scientific knowledge was knowledge so expressed. Although efforts to quantify their subject matters were characteristic of all three of the newborn social sciences, economics went farthest in developing quantitative mannerisms and substituting the outward manner of formulating ideas for the method of arriving at them. As a means of establishing professional status, that practice again proved very effective: such mannerisms eventually made economics

an exclusive domain, a kind of secret society with a language that nobody else understood, and established it as the queen of the social sciences, with commensurate political influence. For their part, both political science and sociology were also deeply preoccupied with their scientific status, and the quantitative methodologies and manners of expression they adopted were (and remain) valuable in maintaining it, though neither discipline has achieved the level of authority enjoyed by economics.

The cultivation of their scientific status allowed the new disciplines to view their histories as part of the history of science: the story of the progressive accumulation of objective knowledge of reality and the ever more accurate and complete understanding of causal interrelationships between its constituent elements. Just like physics and biology, it was subsequently believed, the social sciences continued and dramatically improved upon a long tradition of unsystematic (because not scientific) thought on their subjects. The persistence of that narrative—in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence—attracted to economics, political science, and sociology people actuated by a third motive: a genuine interest in understanding empirical human reality. Believing the social-science narrative, those students eagerly underwent whatever methodological training their mentors suggested and shrugged off the latter's ideological views and related activist tendencies as personal matters. Such social-science idealists have been responsible for much worthy scholarship produced over the first century and a half of social science's academic existence.

In the meantime, psychology—always insistent that, focusing on the individual, it was unlike the other social sciences—largely reverted to its roots in natural science, content to study the animal brain and to leave the riddle of the human mind to philosophers. The preoccupations of the other social sciences have been quite irrelevant to it. The discipline of history, almost immediately abandoned by those of its original members primarily interested in self-promotion, early opted out of the social sciences and joined the ranks of the humanities, on the whole practicing scholarship for its own sake rather than laying any claim to social authority. In anthropology, too, the authority of the profession and the question of whether it should be considered a science have mattered far less than in the three core disciplines of the social science family. Anthropologists have found sufficient satisfaction in doing fieldwork in settings that, while affecting them deeply, could hardly have any bearing on their standing within their own society.

As was true of natural history before the rise of biology, the disciplines of history and anthropology, along with exceptional sociologists, political scientists, and economists, have certainly added valuable information to the common stores of knowledge about humanity. But such information, not being organized according to the logic of science, cannot on its own spur the development of knowledge and, therefore, does not lead to progress in understanding.

Science is essentially a collective, continuous enterprise, impossible without certain institutional conditions—very specific ways of thinking and acting—that are fundamentally different from those that currently exist in research universities, insofar as the subject of humanity is concerned. The contributions of those social-science disciplines and scholars can be likened to the insights of exceptional individuals, capturing one or another aspect of material or organic reality before the emergence of physics and biology: they do not build up. Their significance is limited to cultural and historical moments of public interest in the particular subjects they happen to treat.

Public interest changes with historical circumstances, causing the social sciences to switch directions: fashionable subjects and theories suddenly fall out of favor, and new ones just as quickly come into it, preventing any cumulative development. For example, from the 1940s through the 1980s, World War II and the Cold War made totalitarianism a major focus of political science and inspired in it the creation of the subdiscipline of Sovietology. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 deprived both areas of study of their relevance to policy makers and forced hundreds of political scientists to seek new subjects to investigate, resulting in the new fields of nationalism studies, transition studies, democratization studies, and global studies, among others. Meanwhile, the discontent of many intellectuals with Western society, made legitimate by the Holocaust, shifted the ideology of social justice from preoccupation with economic structures (e.g., socioeconomic class) to preoccupation with identity (e.g., race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation), affecting, in particular, sociology. The discrediting of Marxism with the collapse of Soviet communism in Russia and eastern Europe reinforced this ideological reorientation: American (and then international) sociology became the science of “essentialist” inequalities (i.e., inequalities based on ascribed identities)—inequality now replacing the longtime staple of sociological research, stratification. As a science, sociology claimed the authority to discern such inequalities and to provide leadership in their elimination. Similarly, feminist, queer, and other subaltern (subordinate) perspectives, regularly included in the syllabi of courses on social science theory, prescribed how human reality should be interpreted. Such theories in turn inspired the founding of new programs in and departments of African American, Latinx (formerly Latin American), women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, which were duly recognized as belonging within the social sciences across the United States. Because racial and sexual diversity were topmost on the political agenda of the cultural elite outside academia (being viewed within the elite as promoting equality between identity groups), the universities became politically dependent on the social sciences in the sense of being reliant on them to maintain the favor of the cultural elite. This, in turn, protected the position of the social sciences within the universities even as the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which generally failed to attract women and ethnic minorities (excepting Jews and East and South Asians) in significant numbers, received most

outside funding. In contrast, the humanities, which had neither financial nor political utility, lacked such protection.

In a class of its own regarding authoritative status, the discipline of economics, from its beginning, oscillated between two theoretical and fundamentally prescriptive positions, both inherited from policy and philosophical debates of the 18th and 19th centuries. The classical, or liberal, position (regularly, though mistakenly, identified with Adam Smith) argued for free trade and competition and the self-regulation of the market. The opposing view, originally formulated by Friedrich List in the *National System of Political Economy* (1841), advocated state intervention and regulation, often in the form of protective tariffs. In the 20th century the interventionist approach came to be known as Keynesian economics, after the British economist John Maynard Keynes. After the Cold War, the classical theory was promoted largely under the name “economic globalization” and the opposing interventionist approach under the name “economic nationalism.” (That fact is ironic, as, historically, economic globalization had been an expression of the economic nationalism of the most competitive nations.) The oscillation between the two theories in economics broadly reflects status fluctuations among leading economic powers, as illustrated by the emergence of the United States—in the 19th and early-20th centuries the staunchest representative of protectionism—as the main champion of free trade immediately after World War II and by China’s analogous development as it rose to economic near dominance in the second decade of the 21st century.

One reason why there is no development in the social sciences—why, unlike the sciences, they cannot accumulate objective knowledge of reality within their domains—is that their focus is not their own: as discussed above, they shift in response to changing outside interests within the larger society. But social sciences can greatly reinforce those outside interests by creating the language in which to express them and by placing behind them the authority of science, presenting them as objective and “true.” In the frequent cases of correspondence between outside social interests and the self-interest of the social science professions, that capacity allows the social sciences to wield tremendous influence, directly affecting the legislative process, jurisprudence, the media, primary and secondary education, and politics in the United States (and, to a certain extent, in the rest of the Americas, Europe, and Australia). Indeed, within the long tradition of Western social thought, the “social sciences” stand out as one of the most powerful social forces—that power being due almost exclusively to their name. The intellectual significance of the disconnected, discontinuous efforts of which social sciences consist has been always limited and entirely dependent on the cultural clout of American society. In the 21st century, however, the increasing influence of East and South Asia (e.g., China and India) in world culture, economics, and politics has revealed the collective project of the social sciences as irrelevant to the concerns of societies outside the West. Claiming the authority of science but dispensing with objectivity, these academic disciplines, unlike the exact

and natural sciences, can never become a common legacy of humanity. Remembered only as an episode, however influential, in 20th- and early 21st-century Western intellectual history, the social sciences could lose intellectual significance altogether.

Remarkably, the phrase “social science” came from Europe, where it stood for a science of humanity. In Europe, the idea of the methodical pursuit of objective knowledge of humanity was entertained beginning in the 1840s, if not earlier. That science was necessarily conceived by analogy with physics—because biology as a science did not yet exist—and it was indeed called “social physics” by Comte, who later changed its name to “sociology.” The emphasis on society was suggested by the necessity to manage contemporary sensibilities. Unlike psychiatry and psychology, which were institutionalized as medical professions, the new comprehensive science of humanity would focus on what was human outside the individual, leaving the individual to the eventual science of biology—“organic physics” for Comte—which also figured prominently in his philosophy of science. That understandable compromise, however, jeopardized the future of the science of humanity: it was not appreciated how much was, in fact, in a name.

Early attempts at a science of humanity: Durkheim and Weber

At the turn of the 20th century, two European thinkers, Emile Durkheim in France and Max Weber in Germany, adopted the name “sociology” for the comprehensive science of humanity that both, independently, set out to develop. The subject-matter of the new science, Durkheim postulated, was a reality *sui generis*, of its own kind. It was, like life, autonomous, characterized by its own causality and irreducible to the laws of physics or biology, though existing within the conditions of those laws. Weber was not as explicit as Durkheim, but he, too, clearly recognized the autonomy of the human realm: without it there would be no logical justification for the existence of a separate science of humanity alongside physics and biology. Durkheim conceived of sociology as essentially the science of institutions, which he defined as collective ways of thinking (involving collective mental representations) and acting in various spheres of human life—e.g., in a family, in a market, or in a legislature. In Weber’s conception, sociology was the science of subjectively meaningful social action—i.e., action conceptualized or envisioned by the actor. Thus, for both, sociology was the science of symbolic reality, though Durkheim focused on symbolic phenomena at the collective level (today generally called “culture”), while Weber’s emphasis was on the individual level—i.e., the mind. Neither, however, stressed the symbolic character of his subject. Durkheim, for historical reasons, did not use the word “culture,” but Weber, before deciding in favor of “sociology,” thought of calling his project “cultural history.”

As a science of symbolic reality, of culture and the mind across the spheres of human life, sociology necessarily integrated history and could not be imagined as separate from it: for both

Durkheim and Weber, sociology divorced from history would amount to a science separate from its data. The organization of the “social sciences” in American research universities and all the academic institutions built on their model would make no sense to either of them, in general. Of course, specializations focusing on major institutions—politics, economy, family, religion, science, law—would be necessary, and Durkheim had this in mind when he spoke of political science, legal history, and anthropology as “sociological sciences,” or subfields of sociology, just as genetics and ecology are subfields of biology and inorganic chemistry and mechanics are subfields of physics. Weber examined the construction of meaning in politics, economy, and religion. For him, as for Durkheim, to consider sociology as one among several self-contained “social science” disciplines, each with its own subject, would be analogous to considering biology a separate discipline from other life sciences.

Yet, neither Durkheim nor Weber succeeded in articulating a logically justified program of research for the human science they envisioned. The term “sociology” misled them. Focusing attention on society, it implied that humanity was essentially a social phenomenon, in effect assuming rather than analyzing its ontology. But a moment’s thought is sufficient to realize that society is an attribute of numerous animal species. As a corollary of life, it obviously belongs within the province of biology, automatically making sociology a biological discipline and entailing that all sociologists, as a rule unfamiliar with biology, are unqualified to be sociologists. (The same could be said for all of the other social sciences.) The existence of sociology as an autonomous science is justified only by the irreducibility of the reality it presumes to study to organic and material phenomena.

For all the persuasiveness of Durkheim’s lucid prose, however, it was not the existence of collective representations as such that explained the need for and justified sociology. Can one imagine a more rigidly structured social life, or one more clearly governed by shared, immutable, collective representations, than that of bees? Weber’s subjective meanings were equally inadequate—in this case not because of the evidence that animal actions, which are oriented toward the behavior of others, are also based on subjective meanings but precisely because there is no such evidence: the very subjectivity of such meanings makes it impossible for them to be accessed by others. What was needed, then, was positive evidence of a qualitative distinction between humanity and the rest of the animal world, something evidently affecting all human life, to which biology had no access. The intellectual milieu of both thinkers led them away from such evidence.

Despite explicitly postulating that the reality he focused on was *sui generis*, Durkheim never committed himself as to the nature of that reality. Although he was exclusively preoccupied with human social reality, his emphasis on the social obscured the distinctiveness of humanity and made it unclear why mental representations should be so central in his thinking. Durkheim’s

attitude to psychology further complicated matters, leading him to insist strenuously that sociology was concerned only with collective representations and not with individual “ideas” and that it had nothing in common with the psychology and psychiatry of his day, which were predominantly biological, focused on the organ of the brain.

As Durkheim, in France, had to manage relations with scientists who doubted the scientific credentials of sociology, the difficulty that Weber faced in Germany had to do chiefly with philosophy: to pursue his research agenda, he needed to place himself outside the materialist-idealist dispute. As noted above, materialism was identified with the realm of the real and claimed all of empirical science as its own. Although action certainly belonged to the real, Weber’s interests lay with the empirical study of motives and ideas—which, philosophers would say, being ideal, could perhaps be intuited but could not be studied empirically. Weber thus declared action to be the subject of sociology, but he defined “action” as encompassing both action and inaction—as being both overt and covert, active and passive, comprising both decisions to act (to publicly express thoughts through acting) and decisions not to act—all of this insofar as it was subjectively meaningful for the actor. While enormously productive in the sense of directing so much of Weber’s work, that stratagem, however, was not successful: Weber’s sociology is still commonly interpreted as an idealist response to the historical materialism (see dialectical materialism) of Marx. But Weber was no more an idealist than a materialist. Both disembodied ideas and material phenomena (e.g., population, natural resources, death) interested him only in their meaning for the relevant actors—that is, the ways in which such ideas or phenomena interacted with the individual mind and were reflected in and interpreted by it. But the mind, populated as it was with ideas from the outside, was at every moment connected to the collective consciousness on which Durkheim focused. Durkheim’s collective representations, interacting with the mind, created subjective meanings—the central subject of Weber’s sociology.

Both of the founding thinkers of sociology thought of it as the science that investigates specifically human mental phenomena. Unfortunately, “collective representations” and “social action” were vague new terms that suggested many things to many people, so much so that neither of the two thinkers had any inkling of the close affinity between their projects. Being unable, because of the dominant intellectual trends in their respective countries, to name their subject matter clearly, they were also unable to determine or properly analyze its nature or to argue convincingly why it, and only it, justified the establishment of a new, independent science alongside physics and biology. In the meantime, in the United States, powerful vested interests already stood in the way of such a science.