

## **The Social Sciences in the United States.**

by  
Charles A. Beard.

The growth of the social Sciences as systematic subjects in the United States have accompanied the growth of state and private universities which have made funds available to specialists. As generally in Europe, persons of independent and private means have given little attention to investigation and thought in any of the fields — economics, politics, history, and sociology. Of history, perhaps, an exception should be made, for the work of Rhodes, Henry C. Lea, Beveridge, George Fort, Milton, Bowers, and other non-professional historians who occupy an important place in American historiography. A few economists, such as Stuart Chase, have also operated outside university circles. But judging by volume, if not by quality, American writings in the social sciences are, in the main, academic products. The names of Walker, Clark, Hadley, Jameson, Veblen, Mitchell, Merriam, Lester F. Ward, Giddings, Ross, and Boas, for instance, illustrate the general rule. The United States have produced no Herbert Spencer operating alone on resources not derived from institutions of higher learning. On the whole it may be said with safety that research and writing in the social sciences have fallen into professorial hands and that apart from history few distinguished systematic works in this domain have come from independent amateurs.

To some extent this situation may be explained historically. It has been often said that American citizens were too busily engrossed in conquering and subduing a continent to give much attention to the humanities and the arts. In a certain measure this is true, but it contains a large element of falsehood also. For more than two hundred years there have been large fortunes in the United States, and descendants of the original accumulators have had abundant leisure to devote to studies in the humanities. It is a simple fact that most of them have gone into the business world or sports, pleasures, and loafing. Men and women of wealth in this country have preferred to give money rather than

their lives to the pursuit of the humanities, where they have taken any interest in the subject. Money and leisure have, in truth, been abundant, but the non-professorial worker in the social sciences has been an exception rather than the rule. Whether this can be „explained“ at all and how, may be left to those who feel competent to „explain“ it.

One evident source of this phenomenon is doubtless the degree of technical preparation necessary for distinguished work in the social sciences. Many languages must be acquired. Likewise a wide knowledge of existing literature. Methods and tools of research must be mastered. This takes time, patience, and training; and our colleges do not, perhaps cannot, adequately prepare the sons and daughters of the leisured class for informed and skillful operations in the social sciences. To be sure, universities are open to them, but few take advantage of the opportunities offered. Why, after all, should they eschew the delights of good living for the rigors, labors, meagre rewards, and disappointments of the intellectual life? At all events, American work in the social sciences, considered as systems, is largely academic in economic support and modes of operation.

As in other countries, except Great Britain, American development has run into lines of intense specialization. It would be idle to lay stress on this well-known fact. Anyone curious to ascertain the extent to which it has gone may satisfy his interest by examining the catalogues of ten great Universities or looking at any well-stocked library in the social sciences. The social sciences in the United States are split into innumerable splinters and the ideal seems to have been, and to be to give courses on any subject in which any student may have an interest; the reign of Louis XIV or the customs of the Navaho Indians, for instance.

If we turn from sources of economic support and types of persons engaged in social studies to the training of American workers, in this field we find, from meagre biographical materials, that most of them have been prepared largely through specialization. Few, it seems, have come to their labors from the study of philosophy and general systems of thought. In the main, interest in philosophy sank with the decline of instruction in theology. This statement must not be taken to imply that philosophy has not been studied, but that the background for social study in America has been empirical and special, rather than philosophical. Thorstein Veblen was an outstanding exception, and perhaps the depth, humor, scepticism, and curiosity evident in his work may be ascribed in part to the fact that his primary interest as a university student was philosophical rather than statistical, specialized, and eclectic.

From philosophy he may have derived some of that cosmic irony and cosmic wrath which gave power and distinction to his writings. On the whole American preparation for the social sciences has been positive, empirical, fragmentary, not classical or philosophical or totalitarian.

Reference must also be made to another source of American training and inspiration in the social sciences, namely, German universities. From these institutions American scholars have drawn some of their best and worst features. From Germany were borrowed enthusiasm for patient research, minute inquiries, and that elusive and deceptive thing called „objectivity“. From a country so differently conditioned in social and economic respects as Germany was in the Bismarck-Wilhelminic age, in comparison with the United States, our scholars imported that which was easily exportable, namely, the merest technicalities of science. To the same source of inspiration is thus due a large part of the passion for classification, formalism, and airy speculation which have done so much to sterilize thought in the social sciences.

As may be imagined from what has been said, the spirit of American scholarship in the social sciences is intensely empirical. The assumption has been made that the method of the physical sciences can be applied in the study of social phenomena and that the data of the social sciences are identical with, or analogous to, the data of the physical sciences. Thus it is commonly taken for granted in academic circles that if a volume on history is dry, extensive, accurate as to specific facts, and well documented, it is scientific, that is, true in some sense of the word. It seems to be widely believed also that the selection, amassing, and organization of social data can proceed in a kind of vacuum, beyond the influence of assumptions, hypotheses, and predilections. The belief appears to be held as a truth, rather than cherished as a method or device for influencing thought and action or as a dodge for escaping the pressures of primitive notions in the community.

This is no place to argue the question whether the data of the social sciences are identical with, or analogous to, the data of the physical sciences or the other question whether the method of the physical sciences is really applicable to the data of the social sciences. But there are signs that these issues are dogging the steps and haunting the dreams of American students, and that a disruptive conflict over them is approaching. When the conflict breaks in full force it may split American intellectual life as wide open as the introduction of humanistic learning into Western Europe at the time of the Renaissance. But this is merely an aside.

Whatever may be the merits of the controversy, it is certainly true that every student of the social sciences brings to his choice of areas for research, his detailed investigations, his selection of data, and his organization of materials some more or less clearly developed assumptions and scheme of valuation. If anything is known about the human animal this is known. As Croce says, if some large, generous, and reasoned philosophy does not control the thinker, then some petty, narrow, class, and provincial philosophy will.

And what schemes of organization and valuation have generally prevailed among American scholars in the social sciences? In the main the system of British Manchesterism has prevailed, with modifications in detail and with acquiescence in certain stubborn contradictions in American practice. For confirmation of this large generalization, the reader is referred to that excellent contribution to the history of social thought in the United States, Joseph Dorfman, Thorstein Veblen and His America. The systems of Hegel, Marx, and the German socialists of the chair have had little or no observable influence on American studies in history, politics, economics, or sociology. Veblen may be cited as an exception that illustrates the rule. Even so-called institutional economists bent on „seeing things as they are“ have not escaped the constricting influence of British Manchesterism. Nor have American Catholic writers in this field kept pure and undefiled the scheme of Thomas Aquinas.

For the moment American scholarship runs in its historic course. Its statistical and factual studies have produced materials and works of immense value to future thought and use. Its concentration on research continues unabated, enormously enriching knowledge of human conduct in every area of social life. It would be difficult to pay a tribute too high to achievements of this type. Whether the materials assembled are used in checking assumptions and predilections or in shaping practice, their utility can scarcely be overestimated. This alone is sufficient to give distinction to American work among the scholars of the world.

But efforts of American scholars to bring to pass a social synthesis by the application of the empirical method have come to a dead end. This fact is not generally admitted. Indeed it is stubbornly contested. Yet the guess may be hazarded that on this point the history of American social thought is destined to turn in the not distant future.

### **Die Sozialwissenschaften in den Vereinigten Staaten.**

Der Verfasser bemerkt, dass die Geisteswissenschaften in U. S. A. im Unterschied zu Europa fast ausschliesslich in dem offiziellen Rahmen der Universitäten betrieben werden. Sie standen nicht im Mittelpunkt des allgemeinen Interesses und genossen keine starke materielle Unterstützung. Die Sozialforschung hat sich ausserordentlich spezialisiert, und obwohl, namentlich durch den Einfluss der deutschen Soziologie, ein gewisses Interesse an Synthesen und Zusammenfassungen besteht, sind dennoch die amerikanischen Sozialwissenschaften ständig davon bedroht, sich mit einer blossen Anhäufung von grossem empirischem Material zu begnügen. Es ist geradezu ihre Schicksalsfrage, ob es ihnen gelingt, die ausgedehnten materialreichen Einzeluntersuchungen zu einer wirklichen gesellschaftlichen Theorie zu organisieren.

### **Les sciences sociales aux États-Unis.**

L'auteur remarque que, aux États-Unis, à la différence de ce qui se passe en Europe, les sciences morales sont cultivées presque exclusivement dans le cadre officiel des universités. Elles n'étaient pas pour le public un objet d'intérêt central et ne recevaient pas de grands soutiens matériels. La recherche sociale s'est extraordinairement spécialisée, et encore que, en particulier sous l'influence de la sociologie allemande, il existe un certain intérêt pour les synthèses et les ensembles, les sciences sociales américaines restent cependant toujours menacées de se contenter d'une simple accumulation d'un matériel empirique considérable. C'est là véritablement pour elles la question décisive : réussiront-elles à organiser les recherches de détail étendues, riches de faits, en une véritable théorie de la société ?