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Progressive Science in the Progressive Era

Dorothy Ross is one of the historians who, throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s attempted to not only understand the history of ideas but also the idea of history. Her book, *The Origins of American Social Sciences* examines the influence that many philosophies and socio-political ideas had on the birth of these sciences as professions. Specifically looking at American exceptionalism, Ross unravels just what the belief that America held a special place in history actually did to the country. Following the many rapid changes of the mid and late 19th century she devotes much of chapters 4 and 5 to understanding the dynamics that led to the fear of socialist changes and the eventual liberalization of exceptionalism itself. During the Progressive Era younger thinkers were working under university settings, and as Ross explains reworking the same “exceptionalist hopes” in new liberal language. The thought system, led by men like Herbert Croly still maintained that American ideology was still working under religious auspices. However, John Dewey and eventually George Mead latched on to pragmatic methods to explain world readjustments in the light of specific problems. Ross points out some contradictions with Mead’s analysis of Dewey, but in the end the point is that as the American people liberalized their ways of thinking, the nature of social science and its place within the socio-political sphere opened up as well. Universities, new urban centers, city politics, smaller businesses combining to form monopolies, and workers unionizing all changed the social climate not only in the way people lived their lives

but also the people who tried to make sense of those lives and the larger social dynamic.

Ross's work is brought up to date with Hunter Heyck's *Lincoln Encyclopedia* article "The Social Sciences." In much the same way Ross identifies the new liberalized language of the progressive era social scientists, Heyck is also working with ideas and thoughts that have developed since, and in no doubt because of, Ross's work. The notion that social science is not only to describe things, but to understand mechanisms is very salient. "Social Sciences" sees specialization within the fields reach levels that Ross's subjects would abhor, or at the very least not understand. As Ross discovered the professionalization of businesses and workers impacted society, Heyck reveals that the professionalization of the social sciences have impacted how scientist study those societies—both past and present. Heyck also has the chance to discuss a more secularization of society then they time periods researched early in Ross' book. "The Social Sciences" is a good and specific addendum to Ross's huge, broadly encompassing tome.

The "specific problems" that the United States saw during the progressive era, more consumer goods, worker's unions, aristocratic wealth giving way to pragmatic (industrial) wealth, all sparked changes in social paradigms. Both can be argued as the cause of the other, at this point it becomes a chicken and egg problem. I agree with the "old wine, new bottle" theory, not because I think history is cyclical, but because large populations tend to react to similar stimuli in the same manner. Throughout history there has been varying degrees of success with such endeavors, but the reaction can be broadly cataloged as the same. The study of modernization

on the social sciences can be two fold. How have the sciences changed with regards to the events and chaos they attempted to explain as seen in these works, but to what extent has modernization really impacted the methods for examination? What “modern” methods were employed to understand the subjects? Now that all the social sciences have professionalized and secluded themselves behind strict discipline lines, can they be used for the same purposes they were used for in the early 20th century? Why is it that when sociological ideas and notions begin irking their way into historical narratives they are almost wholly modern? Does anyone look at the sociology of the late 19th century in terms of late 19th century sociology? The same goes for philosophy, we are trained never to use anachronistic terms in or for the past but anachronistic philosophical ideas are fine—“they explain things.” Isn’t it a bit hypocritical to say history is not progressive but treat philosophy and social sciences as if they are and use their “new” findings to explain the past? General thoughts, they probably aren’t correct, but that is how I am seeing things at the moment.