

What distinguishes the questions that Americans expected a social science to answer in the first half of the twentieth century?

While European sociologists in the early twentieth century aimed to intellectually capture the movement from old regimes and economies to new ones, their American counterparts had an entirely different set of questions to answer. Foremost among these were a focus on the defence of liberty and finding answers to specific social problems, as well as trying to formulate a view of the philosophy and methods of American social science itself.

It is important firstly to understand some of the background which contributed to these differences. Europe was experiencing a dramatic shift from old aristocratic regimes to new democratic or socialist ones. The focus was an institutional one, where society preceded the individual and the structure of society was viewed in ideological terms. The aim, according to Deborah Ross, was to 'secure a coherent liberalism on the ruins of a crumbling and increasingly illegitimate patriarchy'. In America, by contrast, there was no old regime to fight against. The aim in America was 'to secure a coherent liberalism on the basis of nothing at all'. The focus was legal and constitutional rather than institutional; the individual was seen to precede society, and the system was seen in its own terms, not in terms of ideology. The connection in America between legal and political theory was far stronger than in Europe - some would even go so far as to say that conflicts in American politics are little more than debates about the interpretation of the constitution.

In Europe these changes of regime led to questions about how mankind could best obtain liberty. Such liberty was defined in many different ways, from Constant's views on the 'liberty of the moderns' (dwelling on rights such as privacy, property ownership, freedom of expression and freedom of movement) to Marx's concept of the liberation of the proletariat from the oppression of the capitalist class. The answers which were generally provided would attempt to establish the 'best' form of government. In America, by contrast, the question was not how to define liberty but how to refine it. Liberty was seen as something already given - enshrined in the Constitution - and American social scientists were to pose the question of how, given liberty, society could progress. Hofstadter wondered "how can a people progress if they have started so near to perfection?" This was generally answered in terms of

material advance and technical improvement within the society, not a qualitative change in the society itself.

In seeing the individual as a citizen, there existed a constant disposition to go back to the 'original position' of individual liberty. The defence of this liberty was the most important theme in American social science. American social scientists saw four main threats to liberty: the tendency towards conformity, socialism, the concentration of power and finally the social problems of urbanisation and industrialisation.

While in Europe liberalism could be seen as radical, in America it was essentially conservative in nature - the aim was to preserve the perfection of the atmosphere in which the republic was founded. This is not conservatism in the classic European sense of preservation of the *ancien regime*, but conservatism in the sense of a massive inducement to conformity brought about by anxiety over individualism, commented on by Tocqueville in 'Democracy in America' and by many other writers. Geoffrey Hawthorn in 'Enlightenment and Despair' says that conformity developed in the name of liberty and equality, as no man could dare to see himself as 'above' or 'below' another. Americans were unable to pass any responsibility for their actions onto an institution, so were forced to examine themselves as individuals to a much greater extent than in more structured societies. Hawthorn claims that American intellectuals were constrained by the dogmatic, fearful influence of their native liberalism, and claims that as a result American social science was 'often vigorous, critical and even radical, but in its very radicalism literally conservative and definitely unhistorical, leaning always to more technical prescriptions than to truly intellectual ones'. Louis Hartz claimed that the problem of the American democracy was not in the danger of the majority, which identified closely enough with the minority in its desire for liberalism that it was prepared not to rule tyrannically. Instead, said Hartz, the danger was in unanimity. Kennan claimed that Americans tended to judge others by 'the extent to which they contrive to be like ourselves'.

This may provide one explanation for why socialism was seen as such a threat. Hartz claims that when Americans face 'military and ideological pressure from without', they tend to close ranks, which 'transforms eccentricity into sin' and dissent into danger of subversion and betrayal. A classic example is seen in the 'red scares' of the 1920s and 1950s, where opponents were not depicted merely as wrong but as evil. Yet there is more to the perceived threat of socialism than its external, Europe-based nature. Socialism was seen as aiming to destroy the very liberalism on which

American society was founded. Hartz states that 'European liberalism, because it was cursed with feudalism, was forced to create the mentality of socialism, and thus was twice cursed. American liberalism freed of the one was freed of the other, and thus was twice blessed'. The society had set itself against patriarchy in any form, and the collective restraint and institutional domination of socialism seemed to represent patriarchy itself. In America there existed no nostalgia for 'solidarity' or 'mutual obligations' which existed elsewhere. Socialism requires not only different means but also different ends; in America, the ends have been given in the ideological sense and in the very constitution of the society itself, so to propose different ends was to mount an argument against the society itself and thus disqualify it from serious consideration. American social scientists were thus denied the theoretical apparatus which allows one to locate one's critical principles in an imaginary future state; only the means were contestable.

In Europe, the question of 'what is the best government' was high on the agenda, allowing forms of government such as communism and nationalism to gain some intellectual foothold. In America by contrast, government was seen as a regrettable necessity, and the state was constructed to make the concentration of power as difficult as possible. American social science was driven by questions about what might interfere with individual rights - groups, combinations, cartels and 'trusts' were all objects of suspicion. So too were party machines - in 1890 there had been a reaction in American cities promoting popular democracy. The state was seen as an arena in which interest groups could battle for influence, and conspiracy theories (especially about the 'military-industrial complex') continue to have wide circulation. One of the difficulties for American social scientists was how to resolve the conflict between restraining these groups and allowing material progress, which partly depends on them.

While Europe tended to concern itself with profound questions such as forms of government, American social scientists were required to be far more specific, dealing with particular 'social problems' as they arose. Principal among these were immigration and the expansion of cities. Chicago had doubled in population between 1880 and 1890, and many other cities were growing at a fast pace as well. This was a source of difficulty for the urban 'middle class', who became confronted with poverty on their doorstep. There were a number of investigations of deprivation and despair by urban churches, seminaries, theological colleges and charities, who

commissioned reports and published journals. These were soon joined by the 'muckraking journalists', who were driven by the new mass-circulation newspapers among a highly literate public to compete for attention with ever more shocking exposés. This public concern meant that by 1900 there were more professors of sociology in American universities than in the whole of Western Europe.

This focus on specific problems relates clearly to the view that American social science had of itself. The emphasis was very much on 'social science' modelled on the natural sciences, rather than on any form of 'social history'. The 'force of time' was seen as either absent or as a corrupting influence. While existing in a very particular place and point in time, it perceives itself as being based on universal virtues and timeless truths, in a similar way to the earliest political and sociological thought about Greece and Rome - history was seen as cyclical, and the truths which applied then were still believed to be true now. While in Enlightened Europe this developed into linear theories, in America this change never occurred.

Such timeless truths are more amenable than linear theories to a mode of study based on the natural sciences, and indeed American social scientists tended to approach their subject in this way. The early fascination with Spencer suggested that scientific theories such as evolution could gain great respect within the domain of sociology and politics. According to Deborah Ross, in America 'the social world is composed of individual behaviours responding to natural stimuli, and the capitalist market and modern urban society are understood, in effect, as part of nature'. Because of their belief in the self-evident righteousness of liberal democracy and capitalism, the interests of the USA were extended to the world, and similar systems were encouraged in developing countries. This belief in timeless and scientific truths is a clear characteristic of American social science.

In conclusion, American social scientists aimed to answer more specific problems than their European contemporaries, taking the ends of government (the defence of liberal democracy and capitalism) as given, and focusing solely on the means. In doing so, they established a social science based on the natural sciences, rejecting European-style linear views of history and thus answering questions about the fundamental nature of the social sciences themselves.