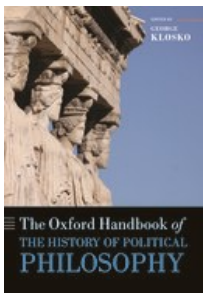

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CHAPTER

25 Political Philosophy and the Idea of a Social Science

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Abstract

It appears that the first recognizably modern understanding of the term "social science" was developed during the French Revolution. From its origins, the search for a science of politics modelled upon the perceived success of the natural sciences has been shaped at least as much by political objectives as by pure intellectual curiosity. From their first appearance, the concepts of a social science or of moral or political science were used interchangeably. There can be no doubt that the emergence of the social sciences has had a transformative effect upon the language and style of modern political philosophy. From its origins in ancient Greece, political philosophy has sought the foundations of political order. The major and most influential philosophy of science was, and to a large extent still is, positivism in its various formulations. The origins of this philosophy are associated primarily with Auguste Comte and, in England with some qualification, John Stuart Mill.

Keywords: Auguste Comte, social science, political science, John Stuart Mill, political philosophy, political order, politics, positivism

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THE idea of a 'social science' or of a 'the moral and political science' seems to have first come into use in France from around the 1760s. It appears that the first recognizably modern understanding of the term 'social science' was developed during the French Revolution (Wokler 1998: 35–76). From its origins the search for a science of politics modelled upon the perceived success of the natural sciences has been shaped at least as much by political objectives as by pure intellectual curiosity. From their first appearance, the concepts of a social science or of moral or political science were used interchangeably. It was generally understood that, despite important differences of emphasis between its various proponents, the point of such a science would be to provide an intellectual grounding for the 'art of government'. In the aftermath of the French Revolution social science would provide the principles for an alternative to what was felt to be the superficial attempts made so far by legislators and statesmen to effect social and political reform.

There can be no doubt that the emergence of the social sciences has had a transformative effect upon the language and style of modern political philosophy. Modern political philosophers generally express themselves and reflect upon the limits of their theories in ways that have been profoundly influenced by the theory and practice of the social sciences. The problem is to discern precisely what that effect has been. For example, there is a highly influential argument that sees the advent of social science as an attempt to undermine or replace the practice of political philosophy as it had generally been understood. The worry is that a genuine science of society would leave no room for the freedom of political conduct and judgement
p. 437 that characterizes an understanding of the practice of politics that is generally valued by political agents ↳ and political philosophers. That the intention to create a social science was in the first place often guided by political motives and is best understood in the context of political argument makes the question even more complex. Furthermore, if a social science were possible, then it would appear that politics in its normal sense would become unnecessary. The implication is that political questions would be thought of as administrative problems that could be solved under the guidance of scientific expertise. In addition, if we consider that pervasive argument and disagreement about public affairs are constitutive of political life, then it would seem that the existence of politics in this sense stands as an insuperable barrier against what might otherwise be considered to be the commendable idea of constructing a social science. On the other hand, it is probably an anachronistic error to see the contrast between social scientists and political philosophers in such stark terms. As projects for a social science from Auguste Comte to Karl Popper have been inseparably bound up with political ideals, it could be argued that the language of social science from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century was often, in reality, a form of political philosophy carried on by other means.

From its origins in ancient Greece, political philosophy has sought the foundations of political order. Political philosophers have often looked for a way of supporting their arguments that rises above the immediate concerns of partisan politics. In the modern context it has been impossible for political philosophers to ignore the claims that have been made on behalf of scientific knowledge as the only respectable ground for doing so. In addition there has also been a persistent belief that, if we are unable to provide our sciences with a firm foundation, then we will not be able to provide one for our politics either. A clear example is provided by Hobbes when he argued that if

> the moral Philosophers had done their job with equal success, I do not know what greater contribution human industry could have made to human happiness. For if the patterns of human action were known with the same certainty as the relations of magnitude in figures, ambition and greed, whose power rests on the false opinions of the common people about right and wrong [*jus et iniura*], would be disarmed, and the human race enjoy such secure peace that (apart from conflicts over space as the population grew) it seems unlikely that it would ever have to fight again. (Hobbes 1998: 5)

Of course, the idea of a political science has a long history. Various figures such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Hume are often mentioned in this respect. This is a plausible view if all that is meant by this is that knowledge of politics, both philosophical and prudential, ought to be put on a more systematic footing than was usually to be expected. However, at least from the late eighteenth century and certainly during the nineteenth century, the idea of a social and political science modelled in one way or another upon the successes of the natural sciences became firmly established.

One of the defining characteristics shared by most political thinkers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the unavoidability of reflection upon their work in terms of its relationship, or lack of one, with the claims made on behalf of the new forms of social and political science. As the idea and
p. 438 nature of a social or political ↳ science became a common topic of debate, the absence of agreement about the form, character, and purpose that a political science ought to possess became readily apparent.

According to John Stuart Mill, for example, all ‘speculations concerning forms of government bear the impress, more or less exclusive, of two conflicting theories respecting political institutions; or, to speak more properly, conflicting conceptions of what political institutions are’. Political institutions, Mill argued, according to one view are conceived ‘as wholly an affair of invention and contrivance’. As political institutions are ‘made by man, it is assumed that man has the choice either to make them or not, and how or on what pattern they shall be made. Government, according to this conception, is a problem, to be worked like any other question of business.’ In addition, those who adopt this view of political philosophy ‘look upon a constitution in the same light…as they would upon a steam plough, or a threshing machine’.

There is another kind of political philosopher, in Mill's view, who, instead of holding to this mechanical image of politics and society, regards ‘it as a sort of spontaneous product, and the science of government as a branch (so to speak) of natural history’. According to this view, political institutions cannot be chosen and designed. The political institutions of a society are regarded as ‘a sort of organic growth’ from the life of that society. The political philosopher can attempt to understand the ‘natural properties’ of those institutions, and he must take them as he finds them. These two doctrines represent a ‘deep-seated difference between two modes of thought’. Neither is completely false, but it would be a mistake to rely exclusively upon one of them at the expense of the other (Mill 1972: 188–90).

Questions concerning the nature of political science were uppermost in the minds of the leading political thinkers of the modern age. A clear and representative example is provided by James Bryce in his presidential address to a joint meeting of the American Political Science Association and to the American Historical Association held in 1909. Acknowledging that the term ‘Political Science seems now generally accepted’, Bryce, nevertheless, felt impelled to ask: ‘What sort of science is it?' In answering his own question, Bryce was certain that political science could not be anything like an exact or physical science. Nor could political science be anything like a less exact science such as meteorology. Clearly the ‘data of politics are the acts of men’, and by ‘calling Politics a Science we mean no more than this, that there is a constancy and uniformity in the tendencies of human nature which enable us to regard the acts of men at one time as due to the same causes which have governed their acts at previous times’. Perhaps more to the point was the question of the relationship of political science to the study of history. The basic subject matter of political science is ‘the acts of men’, and these are recorded in history. Political science, Bryce concluded, is no more a science than is history, ‘because its certainty is no greater than the certainty of history’ (Bryce 1909: 1–19).

Political science, in Bryce's formulation, ‘stands midway between history and politics’. It draws its materials from history and applies them to politics. If political science exists, conceived in more or less naturalistic terms, we have to ask what purpose it serves. This question takes on a particularly pressing
p. 439 quality in a democracy. The point ↳ of political science must be that its findings and conclusions are made use of in the education of citizens and statesmen. In Bryce's account this gives rise to a basic tension within political science. Is it a science that discovers fundamental truths about the nature of politics or is it a discipline whose purpose is to produce knowledge that serves to promote progressive policies? Put another way, can a political science steer clear of political controversy? And, if it cannot, what kind of science is that?

It is an indication of the popularity of the idea of a social science that Bernard Bosanquet, in his ‘The Philosophical Theory of the State’ published in 1899, had no doubt that he had to address the problem of the ‘probable permanence of the difference’ between the aims of sociology, the name given to the new science of society, and those of social philosophy. Although he argues that it is possible to see several origins for the idea of a science of society, it is upon Auguste Comte whom Bosanquet confers the honour of having established a specifically modern version of this idea. The central claim of Comte's doctrine of positivism was that a new science of ‘social physics’ or ‘sociology’ was both possible and desirable. Its ‘essence was the inclusion of human society among the objects of natural science; its watchwords were law and cause…and scientific prediction’ (Bosanquet 2001: 58). The difference between Comte's version of sociology and the

existing tradition of social philosophy was that the 'modern enquirer—the sociologist as such' who uses the language of physical science—looks for the laws and causes that determine collective human life. The essential difference between sociology and political philosophy is missed if we concentrate too much on what they superficially seem to have in common. Despite the fact that they both desire to comprehend the interdependence of all parts of the polis, Bosanquet pointed out that the central question of social or political philosophy was to ask 'what is the completest and most real life of the human soul?' (Bosanquet 2001: 59).

Modern idealist philosophy, to which Bosanquet was a notable contributor, had, since the work of Rousseau and Hegel, revived this ancient tradition of political enquiry. However, this revival was confronted by the existence of a flourishing tradition of research that had taken root especially in France and America, where it found a home in the new university departments of political science and sociology. In Bosanquet's view, the parallel existence of two independent streams of thought was one of the remarkable cultural phenomena of nineteenth-century culture. Despite his scepticism about most of the intellectual claims made on its behalf, it was clear to Bosanquet that philosophy could not afford to ignore the existence of the social sciences. The two traditions now existed side by side, and in his opinion they ought to be thought of as complementary in their contribution to our political understanding. Summarizing this conclusion, he affirmed that 'philosophy gives a significance to sociology; sociology vitalises philosophy' (Bosanquet 2001: 83).

There is a significant body of thought that disagrees with this diagnosis. Rather than observing their complementary existence, it sees the Western tradition of political philosophy that begins with Plato as undermined by and even coming to an end at the same time as the new social sciences emerge. Accounts of the simultaneous rise of social science and the decline of political philosophy have been influential and
p. 440 popular. ↳ This is especially so for those political philosophers working in the mid-twentieth century who felt themselves to be on the list of endangered species. The story as told, for example, by Hannah Arendt has been responsible for much of the way in which the distinction between political philosophy and social science is understood in these terms. The appeal of this particular view of the predicament of political philosophy often rests upon the way in which it is bound up with a theory of cultural decline that focuses upon 'the loss of the political' in the modern world. For Arendt, 'the unconscious substitution of the social for the political betrays the extent to which the original Greek understanding of politics has been lost' (Arendt 1958: 23). Similarly, Sheldon Wolin made it clear that the basic point of his survey of Western political thought was to counter the 'marked hostility' and 'even contempt' for political philosophy that had become de rigueur among the new breed of political scientists (Wolin 2004: p. xxiii). Although influenced by Arendt, the diagnosis advanced by Wolin had a different emphasis. For Wolin it was not simply 'the animus against politics and the political that is characteristic of our time'. Instead, the emergence of the modern social sciences was, in part, a symptom of something much deeper. Certainly for Wolin 'modern social science appears plausible and useful for the same reason that modern political philosophy appears anachronistic and sterile: each is symptomatic of a condition where the sense of the political has been lost' (Wolin 2004: 259). However, the trouble with the new social and political sciences is that they find politics in too many places. This 'sublimation of the political' has the counter-intuitive effect of seeing politics in areas of social life that have previously been thought of as being outside the political domain. If we see politics in too many places, we lose sight of the specific character of 'the political'. If we cease to appreciate the nature and value of politics as an autonomous domain, then it is not too surprising to find that it can be subsumed under a general concept of 'society'—that is, in turn, amenable to scientific investigation (Wolin 2004: 315–89).

Although these general observations do indicate some fundamental conceptual shifts in the history of political thought, it is also important not to be too carried away by overdramatic accounts of the death of political philosophy at the hands of social science. Historians of political thought are often keen to point to

the danger of being misled by the presuppositions of a 'teleological and anachronistic' disciplinary history (Collini, Winch and Burrow 1983: 10–11). On close inspection it appears that histories of this kind are prone to present a misleadingly simple picture of the 'discovery of essentially self-regulating or historicist models of "economy" and "society"' that undercut the idea of an autonomous political realm. As an antidote to this 'epic' way of writing the history of political philosophy it has been pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century Britain many of the political thinkers who are portrayed in such backward looking disciplinary histories as feeling threatened by the emergence of social science were, in fact, more likely to think of themselves as building on the foundations for a genuine political science that had been laid by their predecessors in the eighteenth century. Figures such as Montesquieu and Condorcet, as well as the cast of
p. 441 Scottish moral philosophers and historians that includes Adam Smith, David Hume, Adam ↳ Ferguson, and John Millar among their number were all interested in producing a more scientific account of politics. Nevertheless, as a mild counter to these claims it still must be admitted that all attempts to construct a systematic study of 'things political' during the nineteenth and twentieth century still had to confront the emerging 'cultural hegemony of the philosophy of history' and 'the science of society' (Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983: 11).

Such broad generalizations must also be tempered with a recognition of the distinct national differences that existed in the ways in which political philosophy and the social sciences developed and responded to each other. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it is mainly in Britain and France that the social sciences sought to establish themselves as academic disciplines by self-consciously modelling themselves on the natural sciences, or, more accurately, on a particular understanding of the natural sciences. In Germany the story is more complicated. Here the idea of a natural science of society found it very hard to establish itself against very powerful intellectual and political opposition. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the idea of a social science had no influence on political thinking. For example, it would be foolish to ignore the way in which the dream of a social science grew increasingly influential in Germany when transmitted through the spread of Marxian and Darwinian theory. At the same time, national traditions in political philosophy ought not to be thought of as closed systems. Ideas have never been constrained by national boundaries.

Although the spectre of science has come to haunt political thought throughout the modern period, it has to be recognized that conceptions of science have themselves been open to considerable dispute. There are several strands in the philosophy of science and most have, in varying degrees, influenced political theorists. The major and most influential philosophy of science was, and to a large extent still is, positivism in its various formulations. The origins of this philosophy are associated primarily with Comte and, in England with some qualification, John Stuart Mill. In essence, the central idea of positivism is the unity of method between the sciences, both natural and human. However, this unity takes the natural sciences as the ideal form against which all other versions of scientific endeavour are to be evaluated. Scientific explanation must, according to this account, be causal explanation understood in terms of the subsumption of individual cases under general laws. As far as the plan for a science of man is concerned, the basic difficulty is that positivism in all its varieties cannot accept, or at least has great difficulty in accepting, explanations couched in terms of human intentions, motives, or purposes. Of course, the idea of constructing a natural science of society met with opposition as soon as it was first propounded. Opposition to a science of society based on naturalistic principles existed in all European societies, but the debate was most marked in Germany. Here the distinction between the competing goals of naturalistic explanation and interpretative understanding became a central topic for all discussions of the appropriate methods for the study of politics and society.

The clearly stated political aim of Comte's positive science was the moral and political renewal of European society. As with all attempts to create a science of society, it is the perceived contrast between the advanced
p. 442 state of our understanding of nature ↳ and our primitive understanding of man as a social and political

being that is considered to be the major drawback to progress. As far as Comte was concerned, the profound economic and social transformation of European society signified a new era in which the new positive sciences would replace metaphysics as the foundation for our understanding of the world. This, in turn, would make it possible for the new breed of scientists to apply their knowledge of sociological laws that would enable them to explain, predict, and control the forces that create change and order in society.

In reality, the only law that Comte could claim to have discovered was 'the law of the three stages'. Of course, this is not a scientific law in the strict sense but is more of a generalized description of the supposed progress of the human race. The progression from the theological and metaphysical stages of social development culminates, perhaps unsurprisingly, with Comte's own positive system. Of course, the idea of humanity progressing through three stages was not new even when Comte proposed it. Turgot, Quesnay, Condorcet, and Saint-Simon had all advanced similar ideas. The significant point, however, is that Comte's whole system was aimed at providing a supposedly scientific basis for social and political reform. As John Stuart Mill pointed out, this idea of inevitable progressive development provided Comte with the ammunition to dismiss all the contending political doctrines of the time. He was able to deride all those with whom he disagreed on the grounds of their theories being hopelessly 'metaphysical' (Mill 1961: 73).

John Stuart Mill was an enthusiastic supporter of the Comtean claim to have set 'the moral sciences' on the right path. Mill, however, was also an important representative of another stream of scientific thought. If Comte and, possibly, Marx belong to an 'organic-evolutionary' tradition characterized by a holistic view of society that is explained in functional and historicist terms then Mill can be regarded as offering an alternative. Mill belongs to a more analytical tradition that is individualistic in its methods and seeks to be rigorously deductive. It does not offer a view of societies as organic wholes governed by their own laws of development. According to the Millian view of social science, 'the laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state' (Mill 1961: 59). These two competing ideas still dominate our conceptions of the nature of social science (Skorupski 1989: 276).

Bosanquet's view of peaceful coexistence between social science and political philosophy turned out to be too sanguine. Writing half a century later in a now much quoted statement, Peter Laslett claimed that, 'for the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead' (Laslett 1956: p. vii). Laslett observed that the 300-year-old tradition of philosophical writing in English on politics from Hobbes to Bosanquet seemed to be at an end. Laslett offered the thought that one reason for this might be that the sheer horror of political events in the twentieth century had made politics too serious to be left to philosophers. This, he admitted, tends to contradict the idea that it is often the perception of crisis that provides the reason why 'the great thinkers of the past addressed themselves to political philosophy'. However, if political philosophy is 'for the moment' dead, the question of responsibility remains.

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Political philosophy, Laslett argued, had been killed off by two related developments. Sociology, especially in its Marxist form, and analytical philosophy, especially under the influence of logical positivism, had both made political philosophy seem, at best, an outmoded and, at worst, nonsensical enterprise. Of course, when Laslett made his controversial claim, he was aware of the work of many political thinkers who stand as a counter to the extreme claim of the death of political philosophy. He mentions H. L. A. Hart, Karl Popper, and Michael Oakeshott and could have continued with, for example, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, John Plamenatz, and Friedrich von Hayek. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that none of them produced or attempted to produce a philosophical work that could, for example, be recognized as a twentieth-century equivalent of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. We ought not, however, to assume that the achievements of political science were universally recognized. Many would agree with the claim that 'what is called political science…is a device, invented by university teachers, for avoiding the dangerous subject politics, without achieving science' (Cobban 1953: 335). Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth in Laslett's claim about the death of political philosophy. Political philosophers had since at least the end of the

eighteenth century and certainly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries found themselves faced with the prospect of coming to terms with the implications not only of the idea but also of the practice of social science. Of course, the very idea of a social science could be dismissed out of hand on philosophical grounds (Winch 1958; Oakeshott 1991: 5–42).

A more moderate and typical response to the claims of the social sciences that is indicative of the way in which the intellectual environment of political philosophy has been altered can be illustrated by the example of John Rawls. A marked feature of his *A Theory of Justice*, the book that is most often mentioned as heralding the rebirth of political philosophy in the twentieth century, and of his later work is the use of the theories and concepts of modern social science and, in particular, of economics and 'common sense political sociology' (Rawls 1999, 2001). It now appears that modern political philosophy cannot proceed in either ignorance or denial of the contributions to our understanding made by the theories and findings of social and political scientists. It can be objected that there is nothing radically new here. Clearly most of the important political philosophers who make up the traditional canon were deeply interested and involved in the intellectual and scientific debates of their time. Although this is undeniably true, what is new is the emergence of a distinct idea of science that has become attached to our investigation of the social world. This, in turn, is linked to academic specialization in universities and the continuing dispute and uncertainty about the precise nature of the relationship between political science and political philosophy. Thus, for example, in a typical expression of this state of affairs George Catlin could remark that 'politics, like Gaul, is divided into three parts. From the *practice* of politics at least in theory, we distinguish the *theory.* But the theory itself is divided into political science and political philosophy' (Catlin 1957: 2). The problem was and remains how the three parts are to be related to each other (Stears 2005: 325–50).

p. 444 Laslett's remarks about the death of political philosophy were also oddly anachronistic. They appear to presume the existence of a set of distinct practices in the past called 'political philosophy' and 'political or social science'. The aim of constructing a political or social science in fact took many forms, and it was, of course, driven as much by political as by philosophical arguments. Nevertheless, it is not an exaggeration to say that political thinking during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was influenced by the decisive new intellectual development of a strong belief in the unity of science. According to this view, a true social science is both possible and necessary. It is hard to find any major political thinker during this period who was not touched, either positively or negatively, by this development. Of course, it must not be forgotten that the desire to create a social or political science that would inform, modify, or even replace what was felt to be an older and outmoded tradition of political philosophy was itself often driven by political concerns.

There are two other factors that give the modern development of social science and political philosophy their peculiar character. The first is that positivism in its various forms was the dominant philosophy of science until at least the middle of the twentieth century. All other philosophies of science were, to a large degree, defined in terms of their opposition to positivism. Of course, it is possible to point to earlier appeals to the authority of science made by political philosophers. However, what is distinctive in the modern period is the dominance of one particular idea or set of ideas of a social science and its subject matter. This development can be considered to be at least as important as the emergence of the distinct political ideologies that pervade, if not modern politics, then at least most modern textbooks of political science. Modern political thought and social and political science still exists in the shadow of the ideas of science most associated with positivism.

Philosophers and political thinkers as diverse as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and J. S. Mill were all agreed that 'the study of society could be advanced if its practitioners succeeded in assimilating the spirit and general methods employed in the more "exact" sciences. By means of observation, classification of data, and testing, social phenomena could be made to yield "laws" predicting the future course of events' (Wolin 2004: 320). This idea of a social science was influential and popular with political thinkers across the ideological spectrum. Nevertheless, although the idea of a social

science permeated the intellectual landscape, it found it very difficult to find a secure place in the academic world. It ought not to be forgotten that in Europe sociology, the 'queen of the sciences' in Comte's description, enjoyed a precarious existence well into the second half of the twentieth century whenever attempts were made to organize it as a distinct academic discipline. If sociology and social science in general can be described as a kind of 'third culture' situated between the natural sciences and the humanities, then it was a battlefield where Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment traditions fought over its true nature and purpose (Lepenies 1988: 7). The idea of a science of politics thought of either as a subdivision of the general science of society, sociology, or as a related but distinct mode of enquiry is an additional
p. 445 complication in the relationship between political philosophy and ↳ social science. In institutional terms, that political science and sociology were conceived as distinct academic disciplines was essentially an American achievement. Nevertheless, this development took place to a large degree within an intellectual context strongly influenced by European ideas and preoccupations.

The existence of a general social science presupposes a concept of social reality that defines its distinct properties. If society is to be thought of as a suitable object for scientific investigation based on the model of natural science, then it must be thought of as possessing a unified and law-governed structure. Of course, if this logic is followed, then the question of the place of politics within the general framework of society becomes an even more difficult problem. Even if we agree that the historical evidence produces a more nuanced view of the development of modern political thought than that offered by theorists such as Wolin and Arendt, it is also undeniable that their analyses cannot be dismissed completely. They are right to point out that modern political philosophy has come to recognize that it operates with a vocabulary that is shaped to a large degree by the unavoidable influence of the language of the social sciences.

The emergence of a concept of 'society' in distinction from the concept of 'the state' or of government is one of the most significant developments in the intellectual history of modern political philosophy. The concept of 'society' indicates a distinct site in which human development takes place and, as such, it creates the condition for the possibility of a scientific investigation of its nature and structure. This clearly gives credence to the idea of a science of society that can either supplant or radically transform the practice of political philosophy. It has been argued that in the early nineteenth century the 'three great schools of political thought—the liberals, the sociologues, and the socialists'—all agreed that society, as opposed to the state and political institutions, is 'the locus of the irreversible and irresistible movement of history. In this sense, the sociological viewpoint penetrates and dominates all modern political thought' (Manent 1998: 52).

The modern concept of society has a complex history. In genealogical terms there are several distinct ways in which the idea of the existence of society as a reality distinct from government and the state emerged. It is possible to chart the transformation of the older term 'civil society' from around the end of the eighteenth century. The idea of an inclusive political community, a polis, or civil society inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans was radically transformed into a dualism consisting of civil society as a separate entity existing in opposition to the state. This new understanding of the relationship between these separate entities, in effect, made the idea of a social science that subsumed or replaced the older tradition of political or civil philosophy plausible. Both conceptions of civil society, the ancient and the modern, coexist in Kant's political writings (Ritter 1982). However, a more striking example of the radical separation between civil society and the state is to be found in Hegel's political philosophy. In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* under the general heading of 'ethical life' Hegel's central organizing principle is the clear distinction that he
p. 446 makes between civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), the family, and the state (Hegel 1991). In ↳ addition, the attempt to understand the French Revolution played an important role in the genesis of the modern idea of 'society'. In the wake of the Revolution it appears that 'the men of the nineteenth century no longer lived merely in civil society or the state, they lived in a third element that received various names, usually "society" or "history"' (Manent 1998: 81).

Consideration of Hegel's distinction between the state and civil society played a central role in the development of Karl Marx's idea of society. From his early critique of Hegel's theory of the state Marx developed a distinct and influential view that, nonetheless, in the interests of constructing a theory that would serve both to understand and to overthrow the capitalist mode of production, constructed a concept of society that aimed to transcend the classical idea of politics. Marx advanced a radical critique of the classical idea of politics while at the same time putting forward an analysis of the alienating effects of the modern capitalist mode of production from the standpoint of a reconstructed Hegelian concept of society. For Marx the state and politics in pre-communist society are forms of human alienation. As such they must be overcome if humanity is to emancipate itself. It is clear that for Marx 'political emancipation is at the same time the dissolution of the old society on which rests the sovereign power, the essence of the state alienated from the people' (Marx 1977: 55). The implication is that, in emancipating itself through abolishing the state, mankind at the same time abolishes politics and the state.

The problem here is that the proposal for a general science of society seems to create a conceptual structure that leaves no room either for politics understood as an autonomous activity or for political philosophy as it had been traditionally understood. The later development of the idea of a separate political science that is distinct in its subject matter from other social sciences and in particular from sociology, the 'Queen of the Sciences' according to Comte, raises even more difficulties and confusions. It is quite clear that, for Auguste Comte, the man who gave us the terms 'positivism' and 'sociology', the point of having a science of society was that it would supplant the earlier tradition of political philosophy and provide practical politics with a more secure foundation. As a result, the achievement of genuine social scientific knowledge would replace the need for politics with all its uncertainties, contingency, and unpredictability. But the paradoxical nature of these intellectual developments lies in the fact that, despite their supposed methodological advances and theoretical refinements, they could not escape the fate of remaining in essence practical or political sciences. In other words, they cannot escape the fact that they are in reality a form of political philosophy but expressed in the language of social science. However, if the social sciences are, essentially, political sciences, they are sciences of a new kind that take as their immediate subject matter a new set of questions and problems. It is not too surprising to find that many of the political thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were keen to argue that a new kind of political science was necessary in order to understand the new kind of society that was being created in both Europe and in North America.

The two most significant figures who have come to dominate the contemporary understanding of the history and structure of modern social science are Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. This is a curious development, as neither would approve of most of what goes on in the modern social sciences. In fact, they represent two contrasting and opposed conceptions of the nature of social science and its relationship to politics. Their work also exhibits two distinctly different ways of responding to the predicament of the social and political theorist who is obliged to work in the radically new intellectual context in which the claims of science occupy centre stage. While Durkheim's work provides an example of the criticism that social science has an inherent tendency to avoid or downplay reflection on political topics, this is certainly not the case for Max Weber. In fact, consideration of Weber's thought points in an opposite direction to that indicated by Durkheim and his followers. It is clearly an error to think of social theory or social science as possessing a unified view of politics. While it is true that there is a clear tendency within much of the social theory of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to avoid explicit discussion of political topics, there is also an, at least, equally powerful sense of the tragic dimension of modern politics that can lead, as in the case of Karl Mannheim, for example, to an overwhelming vision of 'disillusioned realism'. Karl Marx (discussed elsewhere in this volume), who is often named as part of the trinity of founders of social modern science, presents a special case. Marx's use of causal language ought not to be allowed to hide the fact that his style of thinking remained essentially Hegelian (Von Wright 1971: 7–8).

Émile Durkheim offers an interesting example of the central claims and limitations of the modern idea of a social science. In particular, it is in its relationship with philosophical reflection upon politics that these difficulties become evident. While a science of society was possible in Durkheim's view only if it steered clear of partisan politics, it, nevertheless, found itself to be unavoidably engaged in political argument. In fact, the origins of Durkheim's thought are to be found in the analysis of philosophical and political questions. This is an observation that has often been made, and it is a point that Durkheim makes repeatedly himself.

Durkheim stated explicitly that he began with philosophy and that he was always drawn back to it by the nature of the problems that he faced. Despite his claims to be constructing a new science, Durkheim's major works are engaged in an analysis of central themes drawn from the canon of classical political philosophy. This is clearly evident in his early work *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim 1933). The title page contains an important quotation from Aristotle's *The Politics*: 'a state is not made up only of so many men, but of different kinds; for similars do not constitute a state' ($1261^{a}23–5$). Durkheim's contrast between two types of social solidarity, organic and mechanical, which are the central concepts in this study, is clearly modelled on Aristotle's criticism of Plato's ideal polis as set out in the *Republic*. In his thesis of 1892 (written in Latin) on 'Montesquieu's Contribution to the Establishment of Political Science' Durkheim discusses *scientia politica* and the study of *res politicae*. His intention was to replace this older terminology with the concepts of social science (Durkheim 1997).

p. 448 Durkheim claims that political science originated in France in the work of the philosophes. In particular, it is in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* that he found the foundations for this new discipline. Despite the possibly confusing terminology, Durkheim considers the newer form of social science to be an advance over the kinds of political philosophy that had been practised in the past. For example, he argues that Montesquieu departed from the familiar Aristotelian classification of the six forms of polis that had become an established feature of European political thought. In doing so Montesquieu did not base his classification upon 'an abstract idea of the state' or upon 'some a priori principle' but on 'the things themselves' (Durkheim 1997: 32). Montesquieu's achievement, in Durkheim's opinion, was to have understood that 'political things' are capable of being the objects of science. However, one of Montesquieu's basic errors, in Durkheim's view, was to have thought that the form of government determines the form of society when, in reality, the real relationship is the reverse. The basic barrier that has to be overcome in order to establish a genuine science of politics is the entrenched idea that there are special properties of political life that make it 'so changeable, so diverse and multiform as not to seem reducible to fixed and definite laws. Nor…do men willingly believe that they are bound by the same necessity as other things in nature' (Durkheim 1997: 73).

Durkheim recognized that a general science of 'social facts', sociology, had to face up to the problem of defining its subject matter. The 'very facts which are ascribed as its subject matter are already studied by a whole host of specific disciplines', which includes political philosophy (Durkheim 1982: 175). Durkheim's response was to argue that 'sociology is and can only be the system, the *corpus* of the social sciences'. In other words, in order to avoid the dangers of producing either an empty formalism or a grand encyclopaedism, sociology must become the transformative method for all the sciences of man.

Durkheim, although not a positivist in a straightforward sense, owed much, despite his observations to the contrary, to the basic proposals of the founder of that movement, Auguste Comte. The aim of both Comte's and Durkheim's versions of sociology was to find an objective and scientific account of the totality of social existence. In order to achieve this aim, the new science of sociology must free itself from all preconceptions. This is particularly difficult for this new science, because 'sentiment so often intervenes. We enthuse over our political and religious beliefs and moral practices very differently from the way we do over the objects of the physical world' (Durkheim 1982: 73). The presumption is that a truly scientific sociology would provide the sound and secure platform from which we would be able to discard our previously held political

commitments. Despite his wide knowledge of the history of political philosophy, Durkheim failed to notice, or at least failed to admit, that this is a point of view that is itself bound to be politically controversial.

Critical discussions of Durkheim's thought often point to the contradiction between his ideal of scientific detachment and his conviction that the point of the acquisition of social scientific knowledge was to enable practitioners to become experts whose task is to enlighten and guide society about its true needs (Lukes
p. 449 1982: 19). For Durkheim the ↳ advance of sociology would create a state of affairs in which the 'duty of the statesman is no longer to propel societies violently towards an ideal which appears attractive to him. His role is rather that of a doctor: he forestalls the outbreak of sickness by maintaining good hygiene, or when it does break out, seeks to cure it' (Durkheim 1982: 104). This means that the scientific sociologist is drawn inevitably into political debate. This is unavoidable if those misleading moral and political preconceptions that stand in the way of progress are to be avoided. A clear illustration of this is provided by his discussion of socialism. Durkheim sees it as a rival, but mistaken, social theory. Socialism is dismissed as 'not a science, a sociology in miniature—it is a cry of grief, sometimes of anger, uttered by men who feel most keenly our collective *malaise*. Socialism is to the facts which produce it what the groans of a sick man are to the illness with which he is afflicted, to the needs that torment him' (Durkheim 1962: 41). Durkheim and his followers failed to see any contradiction between their claims to be constructing a detached and objective social science and the way in which this overtly supported the institutions and secularism of the Third Republic.

Of course, despite its aim to achieve the status of science, Durkheim's sociology could not be anything other than an 'inherently political' enterprise in its formulation of problems, in its proposed explanations, and in its conception of what is to be explained. Clearly a social science of this kind presents a certain way of constructing its own subject matter and, therefore, has a definite point of view about what the nature of politics and, in particular, of what constitutes feasible political conduct (Lukes 1982: 20). This is not a state of affairs that is peculiar to the Durkheimian enterprise. It has been the fate, one could argue, of all attempts by social and political scientists to distance themselves from the world of politics.

Although political questions, both philosophical and practical, do occupy a central place in the formation of Durkheim's thought, he did not consider the possession and struggle over the distribution of power to be important. When he did discuss relations of power, he saw them as aspects of a more general structural ordering produced, most importantly, by the development of the division of labour (Poggi 2000: 124). This stands in direct contrast with the work of Max Weber. The fact that, despite being contemporaries, they seem to have been unaware of each other ought not to be as surprising as it is often supposed. Despite the fact that they are often placed together as founders of modern sociology, they were, in fact, working with completely different intellectual projects (Colliot-Thélène 2007). Weber has become assimilated into the canon of modern social science in a gradual and uneven way. As far as the Anglo-American world is concerned, the initial impact of Weber's thought owes much to the arguments of Talcott Parsons (1937). In his attempt to justify the academic legitimacy of sociology as a social science with its own distinct subject matter, Parsons sought to demonstrate the basic convergence of ideas in the theories of both Weber and Durkheim. The aim of this attempt at theoretical synthesis was to provide a foundation for social science. The end product was an image of society as a social system composed of functioning subsystems of which the political system was one. Of course, following on from this formulation, it is not too surprising that
p. 450 Parsons and those political ↳ scientists influenced by him did not pay much attention to the more controversial problem of Weber's political thought. Unfortunately, as Weber's contemporaries knew, this was a deeply misleading picture. It was only with the intellectual migration from Weimar Germany that the record began to be put right. Weber, on the other hand, had made it clear throughout his life that politics was and remained his 'first love'.

Weber's idea of a social science is complex. His appreciation of the uniqueness of historical events made him deeply sceptical of the generalizing claims made by most contemporary social scientists. In contrast with Comte, J. S. Mill, and Durkheim, there is no acceptance of the necessity nor even of the possibility of finding

natural laws of society. Indeed, Weber argued that, even if we possessed knowledge of such laws, they would be irrelevant for our understanding of the unique features of social and cultural reality in which we are interested. The more general the law, the more it would be devoid of content. Furthermore, in an even stronger contrast with Durkheim and most other contemporary social scientists, Weber did not see the need for a concept of 'society' at all. He pointed out that the concept of the 'social' when used without further substantive elaboration was too vague and ambiguous to be of any real use (Weber 1949: 68). His nominalist account of concept formation was designed to make us aware of the misleading and, even, possibly dangerous nature of the uncritical use of all collective concepts.

Weber is reported as saying that anyone who wanted to make sense of the modern age had to recognize that we live in 'a world substantially shaped by Marx and Nietzsche' (Hennis 1988: 146). It has been argued that Weber is best understood not as a sociologist in the modern sense but as a political thinker who can be placed in a line of predecessors who include Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Tocqueville. Even if we accept this interpretation, it is also evident that Weber's political thought was also 'post-Marxian' in the sense that, in common with most modern social scientists, he had ceased to think of the state as the most important arena for human development. This is reflected in a recurring tension in his social and political thought. While working with a modern distinction between the state and society that is consistent with much of Marx's criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Weber was also deeply aware of the autonomous and distinct nature of political questions. In debunking some of the more extreme contemporary metaphysical theories of society and the state, he was clear that the state ought to be regarded as no more than one institution among others. The modern state in Weber's famous formulation is, in fact, described 'sociologically' in an anti-Aristotelian manner 'in terms of a specific means' that is peculiar to it and not in terms of its purposes. The modern state is 'that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory' (Weber 1994: 310–11).

In a strong contrast to Durkheim and most of those who called themselves sociologists or even political scientists in France, Britain, and America in the early twentieth century, Weber saw politics in terms of the relentless struggle for power and the unavoidable 'rule of man over man'. The modern state is a
p. 451 'relationship of *rule* [*Herrschaft*] by human beings over human beings, and one that rests on the legitimate
↳ use of violence (that is, violence that is held to be legitimate)'. Those who are engaged in politics are 'striving for power, either as a means to attain other goals (which may be ideal or selfish), or power "for its own sake", which is to say, in order to enjoy the feeling of prestige given by power' (Weber 1994: 311). The state is characterized metaphorically as a 'machine' or as an 'enterprise'. As such it is not to be thought of as being anything more than one institution among many. In addition, leadership is a central aspect of the politics of the modern state. All forms of leadership require justification. Weber refers to this as the need for legitimacy. However, he does not seek a philosophical grounding of rule but, instead, describes the three 'ideal types' of 'inner justification' for claims to legitimacy. The concepts of tradition, charisma, and legality as forms of the legitimation of political rule serve to provide what he considered to be a more realistic alternative to the classical triad of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Weber's political and social thought is remarkable for its relentless and thorough destruction of all political illusions. His account of the modern 'iron cage' ('steel casing' is more accurate) of the modern world is also a contributing to the 'disenchantment' of politics.

When Laslett sought to ascribe responsibility for the death of political philosophy, the Marxists and the academic sociologists were prominent among those he blamed. According to Laslett, the Marxists dismiss all political philosophy as socially determined ideology. The Marxists are 'quite simply not interested in the perennial debates which exercised the political philosophers in the past'. The academic sociologists have inherited the same prejudices. However, in keeping with the implicit tensions within this body of ideas 'they seem to alternate between an attitude which proclaims that political philosophy is impossible and an urgent pleading for a new political philosophy which will give them guidance and make sense of their conclusions'

(Laslett 1956: p. viii). This attitude is seen at its most extreme, in Laslett's view, in the work of Karl Mannheim.

Karl Mannheim's early work provides a clear example of the deep disenchantment and 'disillusioning realism' that is frequently the outcome of this kind of sociological analysis of politics. Karl Mannheim expressed the problem of a science of politics most directly in his essay of 1929 'The Prospects of Scientific Politics: The Relationship between Social Theory and Political Practice' (in Mannheim 1960). The question that Mannheim attempted to answer was 'Why is there no science of politics?' He recognized two basic difficulties that stand in the way of the creation of a science of politics. One is the inherent unpredictability and novelty of political events. The other is the unavoidable fact that the political thinker is a participant observer whose own style of thinking and ideological standpoint cannot attain complete detachment from the political world. Mannheim could not provide a convincing answer to his question apart from appealing to the new stratum of 'free-floating intellectuals', as the possible providers of an answer never gained much support even from Mannheim himself. Of course, Mannheim's account of the idea of a science of politics
p. 452 reveals a view of ↳ politics as a field of human activity that seems to be 'irrational' or outside the boundaries of rational organization. A science of politics is necessary in order to provide a counterweight to the irrationality and contingency of politics. As such it would provide the foundation for a rational politics.

Mannheim's account of the possibility of a science of politics is bound up with his theory of ideology. This is the central component of his 'sociology of knowledge'. The main concern of Mannheim's 'sociology of knowledge', despite its seeming claim to generality, is focused essentially upon political thought. In an early essay on 'Conservative Thought' (in Mannheim 1971) Mannheim introduced the idea of a 'morphology' of 'styles of thought'. Political ideologies, such as conservatism, could be studied as distinct 'styles of thought' in a way that is analogous to 'styles of art'. In addition, Mannheim argued that each style of thought has distinct social roots. The problem that arises is that the principle of the social determination of thought undermines any idea of a strict separation between politics and philosophy. If we 'penetrate deeply enough', we will find that 'certain philosophical assumptions lie at the basis of all political thought, and similarly, in any kind of philosophy a certain pattern of action and a definite approach to the world is implied'. All philosophy is in some fundamental sense an expression of ways of making sense of society and this takes its most tangible form in 'the political struggle' (Mannheim 1971: 142).

Although it is true that Mannheim did not accept the possibility of a social science constructed on naturalistic or positivist principles, the difficulties that he found himself facing are a clear and revealing example of the problems that emerge when politics is made an object of social scientific enquiry. Mannheim was quite clear that political argument ought not to be confused with academic discussion. Political argument 'seeks not only to be in the right but also to demolish the basis of its opponent's social and intellectual existence' (Mannheim 1960: 34). The origins of the sociology of knowledge are, in fact, to be found in the practice of democratic politics. It is in the nature of political conflict and especially in democracies that 'the unmasking of the unconscious motives' that bind a social group together is made apparent. For Mannheim this means that, as long as 'modern politics fought its battles with theoretical weapons, the process of unmasking penetrated to the social roots of theory' (Mannheim 1960: 35). The main implication of this way of looking at political thought is that it tends to produce a sense of 'disillusioning realism'. The Marxist weapon of using the concept of ideology as a means for demonstrating what it sees as the illusions of liberalism can be turned back upon the critic: 'nothing was to prevent the opponents of Marxism from availing themselves of the weapon and applying it to Marxism itself' (Mannheim 1960: 67). Although the potentially corrosive effects of this mode of investigation were easy to recognize, formulating a convincing response that did not descend into the restatement of dogma was not always so easy.

The 'disillusioning realism' of Mannheim's reduction of all political philosophy to the status of ideology has
p. 453 self-destructive implications for any faith in the possibility of ↳ political philosophy and of rational

political debate. Despite his attempts to find an escape route from the threat of relativism, Mannheim realized that the logic of his argument must apply to his own ideas too. Nevertheless, the question remained. How can there be a genuine science of politics if politics itself is characterized as a relentless struggle for power? There are two obvious ways of avoiding this problem. One is to deny the centrality of the struggle for power as the defining feature of all politics. The other is to argue that the concept of science deployed by Mannheim and most other thinkers who have similar political ideas is hopelessly misguided.

This is, essentially, the response made by Karl Popper. Popper's work in social and political philosophy takes up the familiar problem, some one hundred years after Comte, of 'the somewhat unsatisfactory state of some of the social sciences and especially of social philosophy'. His interest in this problem was, he tells us, 'greatly stimulated by the rise of totalitarianism and by the failure of the various social sciences and social philosophies to make sense of it' (Popper 1957: 2). Popper's account of the nature of social scientific knowledge is set out as a response to what he considered to be the confusions that have contributed to the disasters of twentieth-century politics. Although not a positivist in the strict sense, Popper agreed with Comte and J. S. Mill in their defence of the unity of method between the natural and social sciences. The problem was that their understanding of science was deficient. Repeating a familiar pattern, Popper argued that a social science free from the errors of historicism inherited from Marx, Comte, and Mill was necessary for political reasons. A science of society that had overcome the errors of the past would provide the necessary intellectual support for the 'open society' (Popper 1945).

The idea of a political science has always been guided as much by political reasons as by intellectual curiosity. From Comte's dream of a 'positive polity' to Karl Popper's argument for the 'open society', it is impossible to separate the project of a science of politics from the world of political argument. Even if the strong claims made for a social science constructed on naturalistic foundations are generally ignored or merely paid lip service by most practitioners of social science, the general intellectual environment in which political philosophy has been conducted over the last century has been irreversibly transformed. Most modern political philosophers accept that understanding of the limitations of the scope of politics that has been taken for granted by political scientists and sociologists. That is to say, rather than seeing their task in terms of an understanding of the polis as a unity, they accept the description of a particular sector of social life as 'politics' (Lefort 1998). In this sense, the claim that there has been a retreat from a genuine engagement with 'the political' does make sense. On the other hand, the social scientific study of politics, whatever the status of its claims to possess genuine scientificity, has had the effect of forcing political philosophers to consider seriously the feasibility of their normative aspirations. While stubborn social facts might prove to be obstacles to the ambitions of political theory, the question of the significance of those supposed facts is itself a philosophical question (Nagel 1991: 21–32).

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