Modernity, the Cold War, and New Whig Histories of Ideas, Pt. 2  

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This post is an interlude in my look at Cold War Social Science. It paves the way for further discussion of that book, but contains no reference to its contents.

A new whig historiography of the social sciences, which I began to describe in part 1, posits a crucial role for intellectual figures’ ideas in history. These ideas need not be the source of the broader (non-intellectualized) ideas that drive social and political trends. Intellectuals’ ideas do, however, at least have the power to reinforce such trends by helping to prevent alternative ideas from instigating change. Thus, in this historiography, past intellectuals’ ideas tend to be illiberal ideas.

The historiography is whiggish rather than anti-intellectual in that it is constructed from the narratives of intellectuals who purport to represent the advent of a genuinely liberating intellectual movement. To understand the narrative features of this historiography, it is important to understand how it retains elements of narratives generated by a long line of purportedly liberating intellectual movements, and how it claims to diverge from them.

As we know, the basic idea of the liberating idea is ancient. In the Enlightenment, it was hoped that the power of reason might liberate society from entrenched authority and superstitions. Circa 1800, critics of that movement — most famously to us, Edmund Burke — saw such intellectual pretensions as a major source of the evils of the French Revolution.

The economic liberation found in Marxist thought declared illiberal ideas (like religion and nationalism) to be ideologies, which actively concealed the material interests of the entrenched authorities who upheld them. To Marxists, truly liberating ideas reflected the material reality of an emerging international socialist order. Critics later turned the pejorative label of “ideology” on Marxism, diagnosing it as an illiberal subjugation of society to the dictates of an intellectualized plan. As we have seen, this was the point of Raymond Aron’s (1905-1983) and Daniel Bell’s (1919-2011) criticisms of “ideology”, not to mention Karl Popper’s (1902-1994) defense of the “open society”.

Intellectuals we can describe as post-Marxist were also critical of Marxism because of its rigid, singular vision of a properly modern social and political order, but they were at least intermittently sympathetic to the openness of its political commitments. Their sharpest tools were designed to dismantle pretensions to transcend ideology. For this reason, they had little patience for those critics who derided Marxism as ideological, while implying that only their own established social, economic, and political order was somehow uniquely appropriate, non-ideological, and, indeed, “liberal”. This isn’t really the place to rehash the ideas of the Frankfurt School, but its long-term influence on thinking in the academic humanities fits in here.

The concept of “science” occupies a peripheral place in this brief history of self-professedly liberating political thought. Enlightenment thinkers were inspired by the accomplishments of natural science, and saw no firm divide between natural, moral, and political philosophy. Marxists often understood their ideas’ grounding in the logic of dialectic to render it scientific. Critics of Marxism, such as Popper, derided pretensions to validate a socio-political order scientifically, but sometimes regarded a properly conceived science as a model for liberal society. Post-Marxist thinkers were critical of the centrality of “science” to (capitalist and communist) modern society as part of its underlying commitment to “instrumental” thinking.

To lend import and narrative coherence to their subject, historians of the social sciences have leaned heavily on the Popperian notion that scientific ideas have helped validate certain social and political orders. However, these historians are not so interested as Popper was in the validating power of what he called the “historicism” of the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic. Rather, they turn more toward the way in which specific research results have been purported to have practical political implications. This interest maps vaguely onto both Popperian and post-Marxist criticisms of logical positivism, but I think it mainly owes to post-Marxist (and older anti-utilitarian) criticisms of the “instrumentalism” of knowledge in modern society.

As mentioned in part 1, for the nineteenth century, historians’ interest in the political uses of the results of scientific research focuses mainly on the influence of biology. This interest probably takes some cues from liberal historian Richard Hofstadter’s (1916-1970) Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915 (1944). It is, however, usually more concerned with a biological reductionism that it finds in sciences like physiognomy, eugenics, and racial ethnography (a concern sometimes associated with Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) late-1970s neologism “biopower”).

This branch of nineteenth-century social science is usually explained by reference to social commitments to stratified class structures and the project of imperialism — which, of course, were the same things Karl Marx had claimed the capitalist interests of his time were using ideology to preserve. Within this historiography, the deliverance of social thought from biology is understood to be a key shift, and the emergence of the cultural anthropology of Franz Boas (1858-1942) an important milestone.

Meanwhile, the historiography of mid-twentieth-century social science is a largely American story of attempts to build knowledge through methodological discipline, and inspired by the clarity of
analysis in the physical sciences. The various branches of this historiography have different reference points, such as the behaviorist psychology of B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), or the “theory of games and economic behavior” of John von Neumann (1903-1957) and Oskar Morgenstern (1902-1977). For the purposes of this discussion, the influence of Max Weber (1864-1920), filtered through Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), is probably most important.

As I observed in my post on the “Cold War rubric,” historians take the characteristically “modern” feature of these sciences to be that, while their frameworks were intended to support the generation of universal knowledge, their ideas ultimately (like the nineteenth-century ideas before them) replicated their own scientific values, and the dominant values of the modern American society around them. By recasting these values as science, these social scientists intellectually — and illiberally — validated the preservation and proselytization of a very particular form of political economy.

Thus, for example, in a 2009 Isis article**, Jamie Cohen-Cole illustrates how some social scientific researchers saw “creativity” as both contrary to the conformist ideals of communism and as a promising subject of social scientific research. The effects of this combination of scientific study and ideology are predictable (222-223):

By marking as irrational the social and political views they disagreed with, liberal social scientists played an important role in marginalizing noncentrist political ideas as irrational and thereby helped generate the apparent consensus of the Cold War era. As a consequence, however, social critics of the Cold War era helped to produce the very conformity that they studied and feared.

Such conclusions, of course, borrow unmistakably from the post-Marxist critical position, which, we need to remember, also sought to cast itself as liberating. Adherents to this position have therefore traditionally had a stake in portraying others’ ideas as illiberally concealing their own illiberality under a veneer of liberalism.

In Pt. 3, we discuss (for real) those aspects of the mid-century narrative that lend the most credence to a whig history of the social sciences — modernization theory and the Kennedy administration’s “best and brightest” Vietnam War hawks — as well as historiographical claims concerning the twin declines of American liberalism and modernist social science.

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*As usual, Popper’s “historicism” is not to be confused with the historical contextualism that is now run-of-the-mill in intellectual history and the history of science.
