

How the ‘Social Sciences’ Killed Our Universities

by Liah Greenfeld

The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s did not bring humanity to the “end of history,” but it did significantly change its direction. As if being deprived of the enemy that mobilized its energies, keeping it in a battle-ready spirit and confident of its course, the West relaxed, turned inward, and, ultimately, lost its direction. No longer focused on the common outside threat, the West let its attention wander from one lesser problem to another, disuniting communities, and making various publics in each of them increasingly dissatisfied. Many of these problems existed previously but were eclipsed by the exigencies of the Cold War. But others were new, either created from scratch or brought about by recent developments. They have been feeding on each other for the last thirty years, tearing our world apart, undermining it, and destroying it from within.

American research universities—our national contribution to world science and higher education, imitated almost all over the globe—while not the only factor contributing to this moribund

development, were undoubtedly the main institution to do so. I noticed that something was awry with the university a few years after coming to the United States in 1982 on a post-doc.

A year after I started teaching at Harvard in 1986, another female sociologist arrived at that illustrious institution. There was a lot of celebration on account of her joining our faculty, but the primary reason for the celebration astonished me: It was not the quality of this sociologist’s work, but the fact that the new faculty member was a woman, female. Coming from Israel, which recently buried its long-term, extremely consequential female prime minister, and where unmarried childless women served in the armed forces, being a woman was a trivial circumstance for me. It certainly was no justification for offering someone a position in the most famous university of the free world, and it was simply peculiar to celebrate such an unjustified appointment.

Granted, I was not able to appreciate then, in my early thirties, how par-for-the-course appointing a woman as a

professor at a distinguished university on the basis of gender would appear to me in the light of the academic madness with which I would be confronted in my advanced middle age. But at that time, I found using genitals as a credential for a university professorship shocking and revolting. Because it was illogical, it was unjust, since justice reflects the logical consistency of our order. And because it was unjust, it was immoral. Utterly flummoxed, I began doubting that the American research university was the home of science and scholarship, which it was believed to be.

In the meantime, other people were beginning to notice that not all was right in American academia. As Mark Bauerlein reminded us very recently, the Culture Wars “broke out in the mid-1980s, on campus they took the form of the ‘Canon Wars,’ whose battlefield was the English syllabus.” By the mid-2020s, the humanities as a whole had paid the price. “At this point, English, history, philosophy, and foreign languages combined draw only four percent of the majors in the United States.”¹

Then, already in 1987, the National Association of Scholars was founded. Its goal was to preserve the “Western intellectual heritage,” but, as its original name, “The Campus Coalition for Democracy” indicated, its orientation was more civic than scholarly. The original leadership of the organization precociously perceived that the university—already then—posed a grave danger to the American way of life. The motto of the NAS, “for reasoned scholarship in

a free society,” professes the principle: free society needs reasoned scholarship.

In the ensuing decades this principle was ruinously discarded. The university imposed on society the disaster of DEI—originally called “affirmative action”—which went against all the principles on which this country—and modern liberal democracy—was founded. It revived antisemitism in America, making the “progressive,” “liberal” West the leader of all the retrograde, illiberal forces in the world. Cynically, 1984-like, it imposed on the free world, in the name of freedom and equality, a regime of suppression of freedom, of inequality, and of open racism. These trends—all coming from the university—appeared unstoppable. It took the unlikely victory of the candidate most detested by the university as President of the United States to restore hope to those who had fallen into despair. President Peter Wood wrote early in March 2025: “It is immensely encouraging to see state legislatures proposing and, in some cases, passing bills that would end “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) indoctrination in public colleges and universities.”²

What has made the university an agent of civic destruction? I believe the answer to this question requires a fuller understanding of the goals, purposes, and motivations of those involved in the development of the modern university. The study of the modern university’s origins and incubation reveals a number of important points: (1) The American research university has had, from its birth, very little to do with the “Western

intellectual heritage,” if by this we mean “great books” and the propagation of the values of liberal democracy; (2) that the reason for its formation was status-protection for a class of elites quickly losing its dominance; (3) that this elite group used the authority of science to consolidate power at a time when science was wresting moral and cultural authority from earlier sources, in particular religion; (4) that the university’s primary contribution to society has been the channeling of money to the sciences, while profiting from this to advance the institution’s self-interest; (6) that even with making this small contribution, on balance, the university has done great damage to society; (7) finally, that the university cannot—and should not—be reformed, but must be abolished and replaced by a new set of institutions, from which we shall be able to expect what we have mistakenly expected from our universities: the support of science and reasoned scholarship, and the education of our youth.

Paradoxically, presented and generally believed to be the home for natural science and humanistic scholarship, the American research university used these recognized fields of inquiry to establish a brand-new profession. This new field did not correspond to any area of study but was nevertheless named “social science.” The name was chosen because after the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), the prestige of science skyrocketed. The label “science” was a claim to authority, which only the few existing philoso-

phers of science would be able to dispute. By successfully laying this claim, “social science” was able to arrogate to itself the right to preside over the education of our youth, previously the province of the church.

It is important to remember that traditionally universities were neither educational institutions nor the home of humanistic scholarship; they were religious institutions, which with time expanded to become places of professional training for the clergy, medicine, and law. “Liberal Arts,” or a general education for future clergymen, doctors, and lawyers were added much later, acquiring importance in the German states during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods.

I have studied the history of the universities, especially American universities, since the end of the last century and shall refer to my conclusions from these studies.³ As I summarized in the relatively lengthy 2020 essay on the social sciences for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, American research universities were the creation of the post-Civil War business magnates—the new super-rich who appreciated the enormous possibilities science (physics and biology) opened for business and were willing to invest in its cultivation—and of the east coast gentry, the scions of old families which formed the bulk of the colonial and pre-Civil War undifferentiated cultural elite. This elite was not intellectually sophisticated, was not much interested in science as the progressive accumulation of reliable knowledge

about empirical reality, and had no understanding of the dramatic revolution in consciousness that made such accumulation possible.

The old gentry's central concern was the change in the traditional structure of American society brought by increasing immigration and, particularly, the rise of a new business elite—the powerful new rich, known among the old guard as “robber barons.” The gentry felt their position in society threatened and believed that great wealth, unconnected to the style of life which legitimated social status before the Civil War, was deleterious to the society as a whole and, concentrated in the hands of the few, made the rest of it poorer and created numerous social problems.

In 1865, some of the prominent members of this traditional elite formed in Boston the American Association for the Promotion of Social Science, the goal of which was “to aid the development of social science, and to guide the public mind to the best practical means of promoting the amendment of laws, the advancement of education, the prevention and repression of crime, the reformation of criminals, and the progress of public morality, the adoption of sanitary regulations, and the diffusion of sound principles on questions of economy, trade, and finance.” The Association, declared its constitution,

will give attention to pauperism, and the topics related thereto; including the responsibility of the well-endowed and successful, the wise and educated, the honest and respectable, for the failures of others. It will aim to bring together

the various societies and individuals now interested in these objects, for the purpose of obtaining by discussion the real elements of truth; by which doubts are removed, conflicting opinions harmonized, and a common ground afforded for treating wisely the great social problems of the day.

Rhetorically, this re-established the authority of the traditional elite, which the rise of the independent business elite undermined. Wisdom and education were equated with honesty and respectability, and wise and educated members of the Association, it was implied, were already in the possession of the necessary social science, including the sound principles on questions of economy, trade, finance, and the responsibilities of successful businessmen. In this context, “science” was not the open-ended process of accumulating objective knowledge by means of logically formulated conjectures subject to refutation by contradictory evidence. It was political advocacy by those with a special insight, capable of making *real elements of truth* come out in discussion, i.e. science as an art, specifically, of persuasion: an ideology.

The preoccupations of “social science” so conceived ranged from “pork as an article of food” to management of insane asylums, but from the start two areas dominated: (1) “economy, trade and finance,” from national debt to relations between labor and capital, which reflected the economic focus of the elite's social criticism; and (2) education, including the “relative value of classical and scientific instruction in schools and

colleges." Here "scientific instruction" referred to instruction in physical sciences, which was relatively new, while classical instruction was the instruction members of the American cultural elite received in their schools and colleges. This education was devalued by the power of very large amounts of money that could be achieved without any education at all. The traditional elite's insistence on the social importance of such (non-scientific) education was connected to its need to protect its status.

Within a year AAPSS merged with the American Social Science Association, a subsidiary of the Massachusetts Board of Charities, also formed in 1865. The leading patrician reformers included three future university presidents who played a major role in the creation of these new organizational settings for the life of the mind. Social scientists capitalized on the uncultured businessmen's interest in natural science and harnessed this interest to their specific status concerns: offering their cooperation in developing institutions for the promotion of science, they established themselves as authorities over how far the definition of science would stretch. The first research university, Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, was established in 1876, when it was thoroughly in the interest of those who identified as "social scientists" to be recognized as scientists; members, together with physicists and biologists, of the scientific profession.

Self-seeking concerns behind this interest in the *name of science* were

evident in two developments which followed closely on the heels of the formation of the first research university: the division of social science into "disciplines" and efforts to model these disciplines on physics, establishing as unquestionable the belief that what made science objective was quantification. This was also the essence of the scientific method, and the authority of a discipline corresponded to the application of this method, or the volume of quantitative formulations in it. The first social science to be institutionalized as an academic discipline within research universities was economic history. That this was history was probably related to the fact that many "social scientists" from patrician American families spent time in German universities, in whose liberal arts' faculties history had already emerged as a highly respectable profession. In its turn, the economic focus of the newly-minted historians reflected the old target of their social criticism.

In 1884, only eight years after the first research university was founded, American historians gathered for the first annual professional convention and formed a trade union: the American Historical Association. During its second annual meeting, in 1885, some of the historians left the AHA and formed the American Economic Association. Several years later, a group of the first American economists left the AEA and formed the American Political Science Association. And in 1905, some of these political scientists, who earlier identified as economists and before that

considered themselves historians, quit APSA to form ASS—the American Sociological Society—the American Sociological Association of today. Thus, five years into the twentieth century, an association of gentry activists and social critics affiliated with a charity board spawned four academic disciplines, splitting “social science” into history, economics, political science, and sociology.

This spontaneous fission was different from specialization in physics and biology. Scientific specialization was prompted by developments in the understanding of the subject matter: anomalies in earlier theories contradicted by evidence, the raising of new questions, the discovery of previously unknown causal factors. It accompanied the advancement of objective knowledge and contributed to its further progress. The break-up of social science into separate disciplines reflected the desire to increase career opportunities. The cart was placed before the horse. The existence of professional associations justified the establishment of university departments in which the declared but undefined professions would be practiced and new generations of professionals trained. This was an effective professionalization strategy, but it mostly contributed to bureaucratization and vested interests, not to the advancement of objective knowledge and understanding of the social sciences’ presumed subject—humanity.

The separate disciplines of economics, political science, and sociology were

to develop within this also nascent institutional environment, in large measure brought into being by the desire of the traditional American elite to re-establish its political and cultural authority. The environment attracted to the new social sciences people actuated by three quite independent motives, which would throughout their existence confuse the identities of these disciplines.

To begin with, the conviction of the original American social scientists that they, better than anyone else, knew how society should be organized and were the natural advisors to policymakers persisted when social science split into economics, political science, and sociology. All three disciplines continued to attract people who were interested not in understanding reality but in changing it, to paraphrase Marx’s famous thesis. However, authority no longer could be claimed on the basis of a genteel lifestyle. With science successfully competing with religion as the source of certain knowledge and even ultimate meaning, the emphasis in social science shifted to “science”: For those who wanted status, a career in science offered the best odds.

The desire to establish themselves as scientists was the main reason for the rise of the discipline of economics. Economists-to-be knew that the sciences systematically advanced reliable knowledge, but had limited understanding of why and how they did so. They wished to do in regard to society what physicists did to matter and biologists to life, and it appeared that these disciplines dealt heavily with numbers

and algorithms. The quantitative fetish has been characteristic of all three newborn social sciences, but economics went furthest in developing quantitative mannerisms (substituting the outward manner of expression for method). As professionalization strategy, this, again, proved very effective: these mannerisms made economics exclusive, a kind of a secret society with an esoteric language that nobody else understood, and established it as the queen of the social sciences.

For their part, both political science and sociology were also deeply preoccupied with their status as sciences: quantitative symbols of this status have retained their value in both disciplines, though neither has achieved the level of authority enjoyed by economics. The cultivation of the symbols of science allowed the new disciplines to see their history as the history of science—the story of progressive accumulation of objective knowledge on their subject matter and ever more accurate understanding of causal relationships among its constituent elements. This narrative has persisted despite overwhelming contrary evidence, attracting to economics, political science, and sociology people actuated by the third motive—the actual interest in understanding empirical human reality. Believing the narrative, they would eagerly invest in whatever methodological training their professors suggested and shrug off the latter's ideological views as a personal matter.

There is more that can be said about the disciplines of psychology, history, and anthropology, but the development of these disciplines as “science” is less wrought for the period of their incubation. Suffice it to say that both psychology, in its work on the animal brain, and anthropology in its field work, had a closer connection to natural science, while most historians were content to follow the methods and means of the humanities. Nevertheless, in a way similar to that of natural history before biology's take-off, history, anthropology, and exceptional sociologists, political scientists, and economists have certainly added valuable information to the common stores of knowledge about humanity. But this information, not being science, cannot on its own spur *development* and, therefore, does not lead to progress in our understanding.

Science is essentially a collective continuous enterprise, impossible without certain institutional conditions—very specific ways of thinking and acting—fundamentally different from the ones that currently exist in research universities in-so-far as the subject of humanity is concerned. Contributions of these scholars can be likened to insights of exceptional individuals, capturing one or another aspect of material or organic reality before the emergence of physics and biology: they do not accumulate. Their significance is limited to cultural and historical moments of public interest in particular subjects they happen to treat.

Public interests change as do historical circumstances, causing the social sciences to switch directions: fashionable subjects and “theories” suddenly fall out of favor and new ones as suddenly acquire it, preventing all cumulative development. WWII and the Cold War for several decades between 1940s and 1980s made totalitarianism a major focus in political science and inspired in it the creation of the subdiscipline of Sovietology. The break-up of the Soviet Union deprived both of their relevance to policymakers and forced hundreds of political scientists to look for another field of expertise, giving rise to nationalism studies, transition studies, democratization studies, global studies, allowing the newly-minted experts to pronounce with authority on subjects of which they, by definition, knew nothing.

The groundswell of discontent with the unfulfilled promise of equality, made legitimate in the context of guilt and disorientation caused by the Holocaust, has shifted the ideology of social justice from preoccupation with economic structures (capitalism, class) to preoccupation with identity (race, gender, sexual orientation), affecting, in particular, sociology. The discreditation of Marxism with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe reinforced this ideological re-orientation: American (and then international) sociology has become the science of identity group essentialism, because by definition groups are inherently unequal, the opposite of equality and emphatically unjust. Thus, identity

groupings replaced the long-time staple of sociological research, stratification. As a science, it claims the authority to discern such inequalities and provide leadership in their elimination. Feminist, queer, and other subaltern narratives, regularly included in social science syllabi, prescribe how human reality should be interpreted.

These theories inspired the foundation of new programs and departments of African American, Latinx, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, which have been added to Divisions of the Social Sciences across the United States. These programs and departments broaden career opportunities for sociologists, political scientists, historians, and, to a lesser extent, other scholars of disciplines in social science and humanities and, for this reason, are considered interdisciplinary. They broaden career opportunities, in particular, for practitioners of these disciplines who represent groups on which the new programs and departments focus, thereby contributing to the racial and sexual “diversity” of the universities. With racial and sexual diversity on top of the articulated political agenda outside of academia, this increased “diversity” of the social sciences makes the universities politically dependent on them. It allows them to hold their own at the time when STEM disciplines, which fail to attract women and non-Asian minorities, receive most outside funding. The humanities, which have neither economic nor political utility, face the possibility of attrition. The focus on

essentialist inequality in “social science” naturally leads to the institutionalization of DEI throughout the university and outside it. Thus, the university changes society.

The “social sciences” actively contribute to the change of interests in the larger society. Then, claiming that their focus is not their own but shifts in accordance with the changing interests outside the university, they greatly reinforce these outside interests by creating the language in which to express them and placing behind them the authority of science—presenting them as objective and “true.” The natural correspondence between outside social interests and self-interests of social science professions allows social sciences to wield tremendous influence, directly affecting the legislative process, jurisprudence, the media, primary and secondary education, and politics in the United States. Within the long tradition of Western social thought, “social sciences” stand out as one of the most powerful social forces despite having zero intellectual significance.⁴

It is the institutionalization of a fundamentally ideological project as science within American research universities that has been steadily undermining and corrupting education, scholarship, and science itself, which in the last three decades has turned into an Orwellian nightmare. As the American research university was created to give a home to this ideological project, its reform would imply essentially gutting it—taking out its very heart and brain—killing

it, in other words. Attacking DEI and calling the university to account for its antisemitism, while immensely encouraging for those hoping for the reassertion of society’s foundational values, are no more than surface measures comparable to attempts to cure metastasizing cancer by compresses applied to resulting skin lesions. The university cannot be reformed, it must be abolished and replaced by a set of new institutions.

This, however, is doable. Only the will to accomplish it is required. The “social sciences” are an enormous fraud perpetrated on our society. They are also the only beneficiary of our university system. Only the interests of the “social sciences” are served by the enormous ever-growing bureaucracies, in turn dependent on the “social sciences” for their self-perpetuation. Nobody but the “social sciences” and the bureaucracies needs them. For all the other constituents of the university—professional schools, sciences, and humanities—the unification in its framework is counterproductive. All of these can exist perfectly in independent institutions—before the arrival of American research universities called “institutes” in Europe: Institutes of Medicine, Institutes of Law, Institutes of Engineering, Research Institutes in Physics, Mathematics, History, Literature, or Classics, separate Schools of Theology—all providing higher education and training for professionals in each particular field. The universities should be disbanded and their professional schools, science, and humanities departments reorganized in

such independent institutes. To these should be added Pedagogical Institutes (Normal Schools), preparing school-teachers.

General education should be provided American children at school; they should arrive at the threshold of their adult lives and whatever continued education or training they choose to acquire as fundamentally and roundly educated people. All these specialized institutes can occupy the existing facilities and keep institutional memory using such names as Harvard Institute of Medicine, Harvard Institute of Physics or Slavic Literatures, Chicago Quad Pedagogical Institute, Chicago Quad Institute of Biology, etc., but without overarching bureaucracies, starting with presidents paid enormous salaries for raising the funds used to pay them.

The idea of “social science” emerged in Europe in the 1840s as the idea for a science focused on humanity as a reality of its own kind in which a particular form of causality operated, strictly analogous to physics as the science of matter and biology as the science of life. But American social science was not inspired by this idea. There is no way of changing it so as to make it, as it now exists, re-oriented to this very worthy project.

The existing social science departments, artificial to begin with, should be disbanded together with the research universities created for their institutionalization, or allowed to die naturally during the period of reorganization, without new intakes of students

and hires and with the senior faculty encouraged to retire. To develop the science of humanity, it has to be started anew—in a separate Institute of its own.

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1. Mark Bauerlein, “How Humanities Professors Got Marginalized,” Newsletter of the James D. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, March 12, 2025.
2. Peter W. Wood, “Institutions Won’t Cure Themselves—That’s Why Anti-DEI Legislation is Necessary,” *Minding the Campus*, March 3, 2025.
3. These conclusions were published, first, in my 2001 book *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth*, Harvard University Press, in regard to the emergence of the discipline of economics in the United States specifically; then in a paper dealing with the sources of that discipline in Europe as well, “How Economics Became a Science: A Surprising Career of a Model Discipline,” in Amanda Anderson and J. Valente (eds.), *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siecle*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, 87-125. They were developed to account for some counterproductive implications of the structure of American research universities in a 2012 essay, “American Universities and the Stagnation of Knowledge,” in Greenfeld (ed.), *The Idea(s) of Joseph Ben-David: The Scientist’s Role and Centers of Learning Revisited*, Transaction Publishers. Another piece, focusing on the deleterious effects of American universities on liberal democracy, is helpful, “Back to 1984: The Role of American Universities in Dismantling Liberal Democracy,” *Society*, 53(4), 2016, 368-374. The latest in this series was my 2020 commissioned contribution of a major new section to Encyclopedia Britannica’s article on Social Science: “Social Science: History, Disciplines, and Facts” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science>, on which I rely in the current paper.
4. The preceding discussion does not exactly quote but generally relies on parts of my essay for Britannica mentioned above.