

Social science - 19th Century, Research, Disciplines

 [britannica.com/topic/social-science/The-19th-century](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-science/The-19th-century)

[Home](#) [Philosophy & Religion](#) [Humanities](#)

The 19th century

The fundamental ideas, themes, and problems of social thought in the 19th century are best understood as responses to the problem of order that was created in people's minds by the weakening of the old order, or European society, under the twin blows of the [French Revolution](#) and the [Industrial Revolution](#). The breakup of the old order—an order that had rested on [kinship](#), [land](#), [social class](#), [religion](#), local [community](#), and [monarchy](#)—set free, as it were, the complex elements of [status](#), authority, and wealth that had been for so long consolidated. In the same way that the [history](#) of 19th-century politics, [industry](#), and trade is basically about the practical efforts of [human](#) beings to reconsolidate these elements, so the history of 19th-century social thought is about theoretical efforts to reconsolidate them—that is, to give them new [contexts](#) of [meaning](#).

In terms of the immediacy and sheer massiveness of impact on human thought and values, it would be difficult to find revolutions of comparable magnitude in human history. The political, social, and cultural changes that began in France and [England](#) at the very end of the 18th century spread almost immediately through Europe and the Americas in the 19th century and then on to Asia, Africa, and Oceania in the 20th. The effects of the two revolutions, the one overwhelmingly democratic in thrust, the other industrial-capitalist, have been to [undermine](#), shake, or topple institutions that had endured for centuries, even millennia, and with them systems of authority, status, belief, and community.

It is easy today to deprecate the suddenness, the cataclysmic nature, the overall revolutionary effect of these two changes and to seek to subordinate results to longer, deeper tendencies of more gradual change in western Europe. But as many historians have pointed out, there was to be seen, and seen by a great many sensitive minds of that day, a dramatic and convulsive quality to the changes that cannot properly be subsumed to the slower processes of continuous evolutionary change. What is crucial, in any event, from the point of view of the history of the social thought of the period, is how the changes were actually [envisaged](#) at the time. By a large number of social philosophers as well as novelists, in all spheres, those changes were regarded as nothing less than earth-shattering.

The coining or redefining of words is an excellent indication of people's perceptions of change in a given historical period. A large number of words taken for granted today came into being in the period marked by the final decade or two of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th. Among these are: *industry*, *industrialist*, [democracy](#), *class*, *middle class*, [ideology](#), *intellectual*, [rationalism](#), *humanitarian*, *atomistic*, *masses*,

commercialism, proletariat, collectivism, equalitarian, liberal, conservative, scientist, utilitarian, bureaucracy, capitalism, and crisis. Some of these words were invented; others reflect new and very different meanings given to old ones. All alike bear witness to the transformed character of the European social landscape as this landscape loomed up to the leading minds of the age. And all these words bear witness too to the emergence of new social philosophies and, most pertinent to the subject of this article, the social sciences as they are known today.

Major themes resulting from democratic and industrial change

It is illuminating to mention a few of the major themes in social thought in the 19th century that were almost the direct results of the democratic and industrial revolutions. It should be borne in mind that these themes are to be seen in the philosophical and literary writing of the age as well as in social thought narrowly defined.

First, there was the great increase in population. Between 1750 and 1850 the population of Europe went from 140 million to 266 million and of the world from 728 million to well over 1 billion. It was an English clergyman and moral philosopher (considered economist), Thomas Malthus, who, in his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), first marked the enormous significance to human welfare of this increase. With the diminution of historic checks on population growth, chiefly those of high mortality rates—a diminution that was, as Malthus realized, one of the rewards of technological progress—there were no easily foreseeable limits to growth of population. And such growth, he stressed, could only upset the traditional balance between population, which Malthus described as growing at a geometrical rate, and food supply, which he declared could grow only at an arithmetical rate. Not all social thinkers in the century took the pessimistic view of the matter that Malthus did, but few if any were indifferent to the impact of explosive increase in population on economy, government, and society.



Thomas Robert Malthus

Thomas Robert Malthus, detail of an engraving after a portrait by J. Linnell, 1833.

Second, there was the condition of labour. It may be possible to see this condition in the early 19th century as in fact better than the condition of the rural masses at earlier times. But the important point is that to a large number of writers in the 19th century it seemed worse and was defined as worse. The wrenching of large numbers of people from the

older and protective contexts of village, guild, parish, and family, and their massing in the new centres of industry, forming slums, living in common squalor and wretchedness, their wages generally behind cost of living, their families growing larger, their standard of living becoming lower, as it seemed—all of this is a frequent theme in the literature and social thought of the century. Economic thought indeed became known as the “dismal science,” because writers who focused on economic matters, from David Ricardo to Karl Marx, could see little likelihood of the condition of labour improving under capitalism.

Third, there was the transformation of property. Not only was more and more property to be seen as industrial—manifest in the factories, business houses, and workshops of the period—but also the very nature of property was changing. Whereas for most of the history of humankind property had been “hard,” visible only in concrete possessions—land and money—now the more intangible kinds of property such as shares of stock, negotiable equities of all kinds, and bonds were assuming ever greater influence in the economy. This led, as was early realized, to the dominance of financial interests, to speculation, and to a symbolic widening of the gulf between the propertied and the masses in the popular imagination (e.g., the former being represented as fat, the latter as thin). The change in the character of property obscured the similarities between the rich and the poor and encouraged thinking about the concentration of property, the accumulation of immense wealth in the hands of a relative few, and, not least, the possibility of economic domination of politics and culture. It should not be thought that only socialists saw property in this light. From Edmund Burke through Auguste Comte, Frédéric Le Play, and John Stuart Mill to Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim, one finds conservatives and liberals looking at the impact of this change in analogous ways.

More From Britannica

governance: Social science



Fourth, there was urbanization—the sudden increase in the number of towns and cities in western Europe and the increase in number of persons living in the historic towns and cities. Whereas in earlier centuries, the city had been regarded almost uniformly as a setting of civilization, culture, and freedom of mind, now one found more and more writers aware of the other side of cities: the atomization of human relationships, broken families, the sense of the mass, of anonymity, alienation, and disrupted values. Sociology particularly among the social sciences was to turn its attention to the problems of urbanization. The contrast between the seemingly natural type of community found in rural areas and the seemingly artificial individualistic society of the cities is a basic contrast in sociology, one that was given much attention by such European thinkers as the French sociologists Le Play and Durkheim; the German sociologists Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and Weber; the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet; and, in America, the sociologists Charles H. Cooley and Robert E. Park.

Fifth, there was technology. With the spread of mechanization, first in the factories and then in agriculture, social thinkers could see possibilities of a rupture of the historic relation between humans and nature, between humans and humans, and even between humans and God. To thinkers as politically different as Thomas Carlyle and Marx, technology seemed to lead to dehumanization of the worker and to a new kind of tyranny over human life. Marx, though, far from despising technology, thought the advent of socialism would counteract all this. Alexis de Tocqueville declared that technology, and especially technical specialization of work, was more degrading to the human mind and spirit than even political tyranny. It was thus in the 19th century that the opposition to technology on moral, psychological, and aesthetic grounds first made its appearance in Western thought.

Sixth, there was the factory system. The importance of this to 19th-century thought has been intimated above. Suffice it to add that along with urbanization and spreading mechanization, the system of work whereby masses of workers left home and family to work long hours in the factories became a major theme of social thought as well as of social reform.

Seventh, and finally, mention is to be made of the development of political masses—that is, the slow but inexorable widening of franchise and electorate through which ever larger numbers of persons became aware of themselves as voters and participants in the political process. This too is a major theme in social thought, to be seen most luminously perhaps in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835–40), a classic work that took not merely America but democracy everywhere as its subject. Tocqueville saw the rise of the political masses, more especially the immense power that could be wielded by the masses, as the single greatest threat to individual freedom and cultural diversity in the ages ahead.

These, then, are the principal themes in the 19th-century writing that may be seen as direct results of the two great revolutions. As themes, they are to be found not only in social thought but, as noted above, in a great deal of the philosophical and literary writing of the century. In their respective ways, the philosophers Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,



Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis de Tocqueville, detail of an oil painting by Théodore Chassériau, 1850; in the Château de Versailles.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Ralph Waldo Emerson were as struck by the consequences of the revolutions as were any specifically social thinkers. So too were such novelists as Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens.

New ideologies

One other point must be emphasized about these themes. They became, almost immediately in the 19th century, the bases of new ideologies. How people reacted to the currents of democracy and industrialism stamped them conservative, liberal, or radical. On the whole, with rarest exceptions, liberals welcomed the two revolutions, seeing in their forces opportunity for freedom and welfare never before known to humankind. The liberal view of society was overwhelmingly democratic, capitalist, industrial, and, of course, individualistic. The case is somewhat different with conservatism and radicalism in the century. Conservatives, beginning with Burke and continuing through Hegel and Matthew Arnold to such minds as John Ruskin later in the century, disliked both democracy and industrialism, preferring the kind of tradition, authority, and civility that had been, in their minds, displaced by the two revolutions. Theirs was a retrospective view, but it was a nonetheless influential one, affecting a number of the leading thinkers of the century, among them Comte and Tocqueville and later Weber and Durkheim. The radicals accepted democracy but only in terms of its extension to all areas of society and its eventual annihilation of any form of authority that did not spring directly from the people as a whole. And although the radicals, for the most part, accepted the phenomenon of industrialism, especially technology, they were uniformly antagonistic to capitalism.



Matthew Arnold

Matthew Arnold, detail of an oil painting by G.F. Watts; in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

These ideological consequences of the two revolutions proved extremely important to social thought, for it would be difficult to identify an intellectual in the century—whether a philosopher or a writer—who was not, in some degree at least, caught up in ideological currents. In referring to proto-sociologists such as Henri de Saint-Simon, Comte, and Le Play; to proto-economists such as Ricardo, Jean-Baptiste Say, and Marx; to proto-political scientists such as Bentham and John Austin; and even to anthropologists like Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, one has before one persons who were

engaged not merely in the study of society but also in often strongly partisan ideology. Some were liberals, some conservatives, others radicals. All drew from the currents of ideology that had been generated by the two great revolutions.

New intellectual and philosophical tendencies

It is important also to identify three other powerful tendencies of thought that influenced all of the social sciences. The first is a positivism that was not merely an appeal to science but almost reverence for science; the second, humanitarianism; the third, the philosophy of evolution.

The positivist appeal of science was to be seen everywhere. The 19th century saw the virtual institutionalization of this ideal—possibly even canonization. The great aim was that of dealing with moral values, institutions, and all social phenomena through the same fundamental methods that could be seen so luminously in physics and, after Darwin, in biology. Prior to the 19th century, no very clear distinction had been made between philosophy and science, and the term *philosophy* was even preferred by those working directly with physical materials, seeking laws and principles in the fashion of Sir Isaac Newton or William Harvey—that is, by persons whom one would now call scientists.

In the 19th century, in contrast, the distinction between philosophy and science became an overwhelming one. Virtually every area of human thought and behaviour was considered by a rising number of persons to be amenable to scientific investigation in precisely the same degree that physical data were. More than anyone else, it was Comte who heralded the idea of the scientific treatment of social behaviour. His *Cours de philosophie positive* (published in English as *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*), published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842, sought to demonstrate irrefutably not merely the possibility but the inevitability of a science of humanity, one for which Comte eventually suggested the word *sociology* and that would do for humanity as an aspect of reality exactly what biology had already done for individual humans as biological organisms.

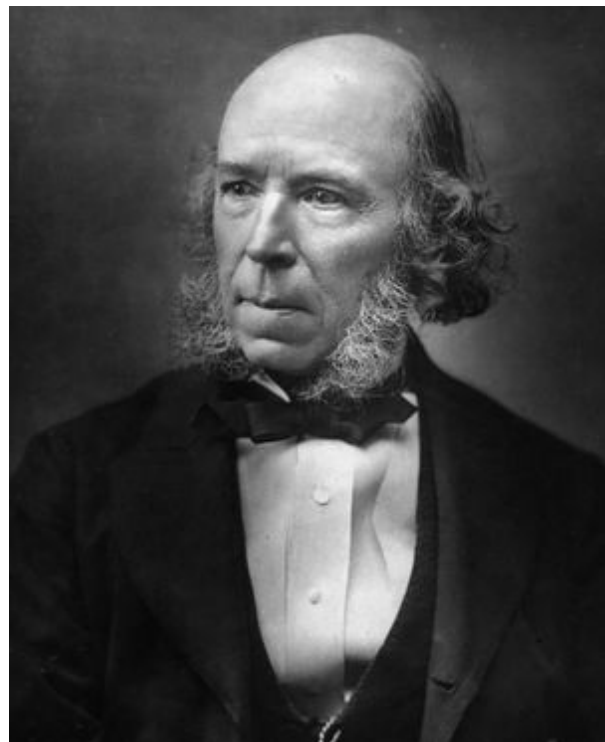


Auguste Comte

Auguste Comte, drawing by Tony Toullion, 19th century; in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Humanitarianism, though a very distinguishable current of thought in the century, was closely related to the idea of a science of society. The ultimate purpose of social science was thought by almost everyone to be the welfare of society, the improvement of its moral and social condition. Humanitarianism, strictly defined, is the institutionalization of compassion; it is the extension of welfare and succour from the limited areas in which these had historically been found, chiefly family, village, and the church, to society at large. One of the most notable and also distinctive aspects of the 19th century was the constantly rising number of persons, almost wholly from the new middle class, who worked directly for the betterment of society. In the many projects and proposals for relief of the destitute, improvement of slums, amelioration of the plight of the insane, the indigent, and imprisoned, and other afflicted minorities could be seen the spirit of humanitarianism at work. All kinds of associations were formed, including temperance associations, groups and societies for the abolition of slavery and of poverty and for the improvement of literacy, among other objectives. Nothing like the 19th-century spirit of humanitarianism had ever been seen before in western Europe—not even in France during the Enlightenment, where interest in humankind's salvation tended to be more intellectual than humanitarian in the strict sense. Humanitarianism was the guiding spirit of the 19th century social reform and, as noted earlier, social reform and social science were regarded as identical. All that helped the cause of the one could be seen as helpful to the other.

The third of the intellectual influences is that of evolution. It was to affect every one of the social sciences, each of which was as much concerned with the development of things as with their structures. An interest in development was to be found in the 18th century, as noted earlier. But this interest was small and specialized compared with 19th-century theories of social evolution. The impact of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, was of course great and further enhanced the appeal of the evolutionary view of things. But it is very important to recognize that ideas of social evolution had their own origins and contexts and that Darwin's theory was fundamentally misinterpreted by most social thinkers. The evolutionary works of such influential authors as Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Marx had been completed, or well begun, before publication of Darwin's work and were Linnaen, that is, first, assuming inheritance of acquired characteristics and unilinear progressive development from simpler and less durable to



Herbert Spencer

more complex and more durable forms of life; and, second, classificatory or descriptive in nature, organizing and cataloguing data but offering little in terms of understanding. The important point, in any event, is that the idea or the philosophy of evolution was in the air throughout the century and was profoundly contributory to the idea of sociology, as a science similar to such fields as geology, astronomy, and biology. Evolution was as permeative and confusing an idea as the Trinity had been in medieval Europe. Darwin both completely transformed it and endowed it with an immense authority, making evolution coterminous with science. Social scientists would claim this authority, though very few of them would be aware of the transformation which it reflected.

History of the separate disciplines

Among the disciplines that formed the social sciences, two contrary, for a time equally powerful, tendencies at first dominated them. The first was the drive toward unification, toward a single, master social science, whatever it might be called. The second tendency was toward specialization of the individual social sciences. If, clearly, it is the second that has triumphed, with the results to be seen in the disparate, sometimes jealous, highly specialized disciplines seen today, the first was not without great importance and must also be examined.

What emerges from the critical rationalism of the 18th century is not, in the first instance, a conception of need for a plurality of social sciences, but rather for a single science of humanity that would take its place in the hierarchy of the sciences that included the fields of astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology. In the 1840s, Comte called for a new science, one with humanity, not humans as animals, as its subject (humans as animals already being a subject of biology). Although he conceived of society as the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, he assuredly had but a single encompassing science in mind—not a congeries of disciplines, each concerned with some single aspect of human behaviour in society. The same was true of Bentham, Marx, and Spencer. All of these thinkers, and there were many others to join them, saw the study of society as a unified enterprise. They would have scoffed, and on occasion did, at any notion of a separate economics, political science, sociology, and so on. Humanity is an indivisible thing, they would have argued; so, too, must be the study of society, its distinguishing characteristic.

It was, however, the opposite tendency of specialization or differentiation that won out. No matter how the century began, or what were the dreams of a Comte, Spencer, or Marx, when the 19th century ended, not one but several distinct, competitive social sciences were to be found. Aiding this process was the development of the colleges and universities. The growing desire for an elective system, for a substantial number of academic specializations, and for differentiation of academic degrees contributed strongly to the differentiation of the social sciences. This was first and most strongly to be seen in Germany, where, from about 1815 on, all scholarship and science were based in the universities and where competition for status among the several disciplines was keen. But by the end of the century the same phenomenon of specialization was to

be found in the United States (where admiration for the German system was very great in academic circles) and, in somewhat less degree, in France and England. On the face of it, the differentiation of the social sciences in the 19th century was but one aspect of a larger process that was to be seen vividly in the physical sciences and the humanities. No major field escaped the lure of specialization of investigation, and clearly, a great deal of the sheer bulk of learning that passed from the 19th to the 20th century was the direct consequence of this specialization. But the reasons behind specialization in the social sciences, the category that earlier did not exist, were different.

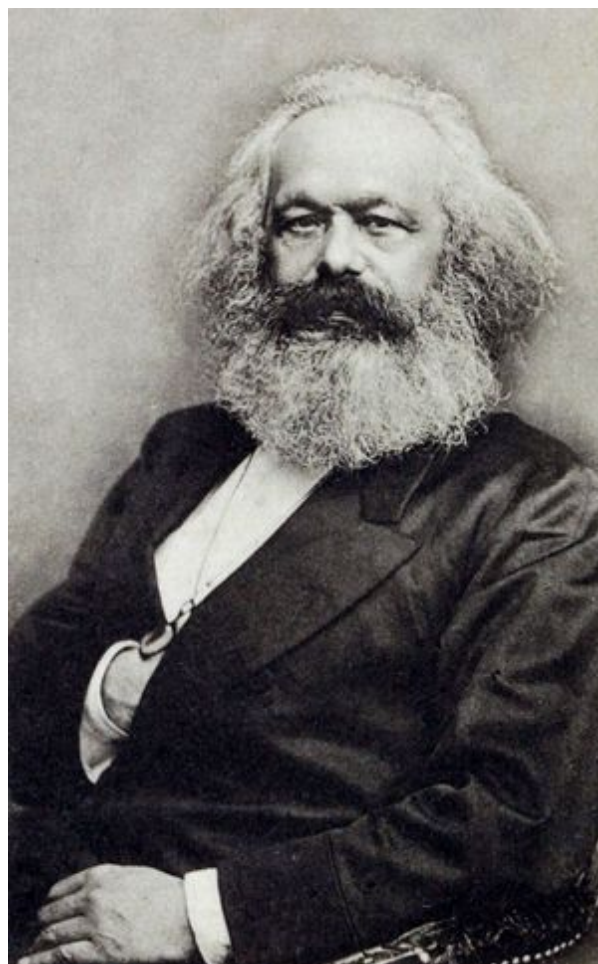
Economics

It was economics that first attained the status of an exclusive area of speculation and study among the social sciences. The huge volumes on administration, with their extensive lexicons, written by German cameralists, and that autonomy and self-regulation that the physiocrats and Smith (especially as interpreted by German academics) had found, or thought they had found, in the processes of wealth, in the operation of prices, rents, interest, and wages, during the 18th century became the basis of a separate and distinctive trend of thought, called “political economy,” in the 19th. Hence the emphasis upon what came to be widely called laissez-faire. If, as it was argued, the processes of wealth operate naturally in terms of their own built-in mechanisms, then not only should these be studied separately but they should, in any wise polity, be left alone by government and society. This was, in general, the overriding emphasis of such thinkers as Ricardo, Mill, and Nassau William Senior in England, of Frédéric Bastiat and Say in France, and, somewhat later, the Austrian school of Carl Menger. This emphasis is today called “classical” in economics, and it is even now, though with substantial modifications, a strong position in the field.

There were from the beginning, however, thinkers on the subject, including Smith himself, who diverged sharply from this laissez-faire, classical view. In Germany the enormously influential Friedrich List originated the school of “national economy”—which would be today recognized as economic nationalism, opposing international free trade and advocating protectionist measures for domestic economy (a view with which Smith agreed under certain circumstances, the difference between Smith and List being that the former was a pragmatist, while for the latter the position was a matter of principle). There were also the so-called historical economists, proceeding from the presuppositions of social evolution, referred to above. Such figures as Wilhelm Roscher and Karl Knies in Germany tended to dismiss the assumptions of timelessness and universality regarding economic behaviour that were axiomatic among the German followers of Smith, and they strongly insisted upon the developmental character of capitalism, evolving in a long series of stages from other types of economy.

Also prominent throughout the century were those who came to be called the socialists. They too repudiated any notion of timelessness and universality in capitalism and its elements of private property, competition, and profit. Not only was this system but a passing stage of economic development; it could be—and, as Marx was to emphasize,

would be—shortly supplanted by a more humane and also realistic economic system based upon cooperation, the people’s ownership of the means of production, and planning that would eradicate the vices of competition and conflict.



Karl Marx

Political science

Rivalling economic thought in popularity during the century was “political science,” so called long before “science” was appropriated as the proper name for the unbiased exploration of the empirical world. The line of systematic interest in the state that had begun in modern Europe with Niccolò Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, among others, widened and lengthened in the 19th century, the consequence of the two revolutions. If the Industrial Revolution seemed to supply all the problems frustrating the existence of a stable and humane society, the political-democratic revolution could be seen as containing many of the answers to these problems. It was the democratic revolution, especially in France, that created the vision of a political government responsible for all aspects of human society and, most important, possessed the power to wield this responsibility. This power, known as sovereignty, could be seen as holding the same relation to political science in the 19th century that capital held to economic thought. A very large number of political “scientists” essentially ruminated on the varied properties of sovereignty. There was a strong tendency on the part of such thinkers as Bentham, Austin, and Mill in England and Francis Lieber and Woodrow Wilson in the United States to see the state and its claimed sovereignty over human lives in much the same terms in which classical political economists saw capitalism.

Among political scientists there was the same historical-evolutionary dissent from this view, however, that existed in political economy. Such writers as Sir Henry Maine in England, Numa Fustel de Coulanges in France, and Otto von Gierke in Germany declared that state and sovereignty were not timeless and universal nor the results of some “social contract” envisaged by such philosophers as Locke and Rousseau but, rather, structures formed slowly through developmental or historical processes. Hence the strong interest, especially in the late 19th century, in the origins of political institutions in kinship, village, and caste, and in the successive stages of development that have characterized these institutions. In political science, as in political economy, in short, the “classical” analytical approach was strongly rivalled by the evolutionary. Both approaches go back to the 18th century in their fundamental elements, but what is seen in the 19th century is the greater systematization and the much wider range of data employed.

Cultural anthropology.

Anthropology also originated in the 19th century. Strictly defined as the science of humankind, it could be seen as superseding specialized areas of focus such as political economy and political science. In practice and from the beginning, however, anthropology concerned itself overwhelmingly with small-scale preindustrial societies. On the one hand was physical anthropology, concerned chiefly with the evolution of humans as a biological species, with the successive forms and protoforms of the species, and with genetic systems. On the other hand was social and cultural anthropology: here the interest was in the full range of humankind’s institutions, though its researches were in fact confined to those found among existing preliterate peoples in Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas. Above all other concepts, “culture” was the central element of this great area of anthropology, or ethnology, as it was often called to distinguish it from physical anthropology. Culture, as a concept, called attention to the nonbiological, nonracial, noninstinctual dimension of human life, the basis of what is called civilization: its values, techniques, and ideas in all spheres. Tylor’s landmark work of 1871, Primitive Culture, defined culture as the part of human behaviour that is learned—an inadequate definition, as proved by the fact that much of animal behaviour is also learned, the difference between animal and human behaviour being, rather, in the character of their respective learning: direct among animals and mostly indirect among humans. Since of all social sciences cultural anthropology places the greatest emphasis on the cultural foundations of human behaviour and thought in society, this inadequate definition has been in no small part responsible for the inadequate understanding of culture in all of them.

Scarcely less than political science or political economy, cultural anthropology shared in the themes of the two revolutions and their impact on the world. If the data that cultural anthropologists actually worked with were generally in the remote areas of the world, it was the effects of the two revolutions that, in a sense, kept opening up these parts of the

world to their inquiry. And, as was true of the other social sciences, the cultural anthropologists were immersed in economic problems and problems of polity, social class, and community, albeit among preliterate rather than “modern” peoples.

Overwhelmingly, without major exception indeed, cultural anthropology was evolutionary in thrust in the 19th century. Tylor and Sir John Lubbock in England, Morgan in the United States, Adolf Bastian and Theodor Waitz in Germany, and all others in the main line of the study of “primitive” culture saw existing indigenous societies in the world as prototypes of their own “primitive ancestors”—fossilized remains, so to speak, of stages of development that western Europe had once gone through. Despite the vast array of data compiled on non-Western cultures, the same basic European-centred objectives are to be found among cultural anthropologists as among other social thinkers in the century. Almost universally, then, the modern West was regarded as the latest point in a line of progress that was single and unilinear and on which all other peoples in the world could be fitted as illustrations, as it were, of Western people’s own past.