

Introduction

“Liberalism” is something of a dirty word in America today. Reaganites scorn it as an unaffordable fad that could still wreck efforts to restore capitalist prosperity. Corporatist Democrats honor liberalism’s past successes but now shun it as soft, mushy, and chickenhearted. Liberal doctrines are hardly adequate guides into the brave new world of the high-tech future. Democratic socialists trace the liberal philosophy’s internal contradictions—liberals always seem to promise much more than they can deliver. Today, when choices between capitalist growth and democratic revival must be made, liberals can only shrug their shoulders. Whatever the American political future, our present political dialogue suggests that it is unlikely to be a liberal one.

Oddly, contemporary critics and supporters of liberalism alike seem to assume that it once was the preeminent public philosophy—that it succeeded in some fundamental way in shaping American politics to its prescriptions. There are many reasons to believe that this is indeed so. Liberals forged giant popular coalitions, staving off through timely reforms the growth of sizeable opposition to American capitalism. They built a welfare state with at least minimal protections against the ravages of the marketplace. They democratized American political institutions by extending civil and social rights to previously exploited groups and races. The litany could continue: Liberals most of all modernized American politics to fit the requirements of the twentieth century. If liberalism is now in eclipse, it is perhaps because most of its agenda has been successfully completed.¹

Note: Bruce Miroff has made corrections to the text of the first edition of *Disenchanted Realists*, but the book has been neither updated nor revised; the second edition retains the late Ray Seidelman’s distinctive argument and writing style.

Yet a historical perspective on liberalism's twentieth-century history might reveal that its successes were much more limited and tenuous, its aspirations and hopes more extensive, and its intellectual pretensions more ambitious than commentary suggests. A consistent undercurrent of anxiety and fear of failure exists among liberal intellectuals themselves, even as they have watched their reforms become public philosophy and policy. Just possibly, liberalism will not be eclipsed in America because it may not have ever possessed the popularity and power its supporters and detractors tend to assign it.

This book explores a single if crucial strain of disenchantment and disaffection with liberal politics among selected liberal thinkers themselves. Our subject is particular American scientists of politics and their connections with the vision, agenda, and methods of liberal politics. It is not a coincidence that a science of politics was born with the political movements and doctrines of modern liberalism. We argue that prominent political scientists have in fact helped to define the modern liberal view of democracy, society, and state in twentieth-century America. The consistency and aims of the arguments made by the political scientists discussed in this book have shaped the hopes, guided the forms, and suffered the consequences of reform politics from its birth in the late nineteenth century to the present impasse of the 1970s and 1980s. Much of the present crisis in liberal politics can be traced to the substance and disappointment of these hopes. A science of politics in America has encountered the same problems, crises, and successes as American reformers themselves. When liberalism falters, political science trembles.

Not all political scientists—perhaps not even most—have blended scholarship and political advocacy, a science of politics with a science “for” politics. For that reason, this book is not a history of a discipline, but rather a selected interpretation of those who built the discipline as a science for democracy, a way of linking objective professional political study with political reforms. This is a distinct group in political science history, including most of the more prominent scholars from Lester Ward to Theodore Lowi, from Charles Beard to Walter Dean Burnham, from Woodrow Wilson to V. O. Key.

Together, all these scholars have forged a reasonably coherent, consistent, and critical perspective on what they consider the main features of the American political tradition. All of them have seen political science as a nonrevolutionary alternative to the outdated political ideologies and

practices of preindustrial America. Self-conscious modernists, they have been preoccupied with the absence of modernizing impulses in American political culture. Self-conscious revolutionaries in their scholarly methods, they are all self-conscious moderates and hopeful optimists about the ultimate victory and vindication of their notion of political truth. Anxious about the emergence of political extremes in America, they nonetheless have proposed far-reaching and ambitious reforms of political institutions and citizen attitudes. Impressed with their own cosmopolitanism, all of them have been eager to introduce European ideas and practices into our intellectual and political life. Yet they have all marveled at and complained about the “uniqueness” and peculiarity of American political development. The nation’s peculiarities have been alternatively cursed and adored. Intent on maintaining objectivity in their studies, they have been supreme political advocates. Builders of a profession of political scientists, they have always sought to affect publics far beyond the ivory tower.²

Their seeming fondness for opposites suggests that their work embodies impossible contradictions and tensions. Ultimately, we hope to show that these contradictions and tensions are not to be found in their attempted union of facts and values, advocacy and objectivity, political and professional roles. Easy reconciliation of these opposites makes their work and lives exceptionally interesting and distinguishes their intellectual project from disciplinary drones and professional politicians. Their distresses are rather to be found in their basic claims about American politics and their consistent inability to reach and guide the publics they designate as the natural carriers of political reform.

Not surprising for such ambitious people, they have located a progressive dynamic of democratic modernization to which their brand of political science has been closely attached. Their scholarship has pretended to reveal the open vistas ahead for the modern American republic and has urged the polity on to this happy destiny. Above all, political scientists have tried but failed to modernize what they consider to be the retrograde and outdated aspects of two traditions of American political thought.

These traditions are appropriately labeled *institutionalist* and *radical democratic*. While the following chapters trace the personal and collective traumas of political scientists as they have confronted these two traditions, outlining the essentials of these traditions before we continue is worthwhile. Modern political science usually has been understood as a simple extension of one or the other of them. We argue that the political and

intellectual departures from the past are more important than political science's continuity with older modes of American political thinking and acting.

Institutionalists and Radical Democrats

The institutionalist tradition—the dominant mode of American governmental organization and political thought in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—is perhaps best captured in the victorious ideas of the Federalists and their 1787 Constitution. Norman Jacobson has called the political philosophy of the Constitution a “self-fulfilling prophecy” because the document not only established rules and procedures, but also has educated Americans and their perceptions of human nature in politics.³

Institutionalists like the Founders have been skeptical about human political capacities even when there has been evidence to the contrary. They have been preoccupied with the ubiquity of greed, avarice, and conflict in the history of republics, and fearful about the malevolent effects of majority rule on minorities and their rights. American institutions could be peculiar and unique, but not the citizens they governed. Eleven years after a revolution that some thought would “begin the world over again,” John Adams still could say that Americans were after all “like all other people,” that “they never merited the character of very exalted virtue” that enthusiastic revolutionaries liked to attribute to citizens of the new Republic.⁴

But the genius of the American Founders lay in their peculiar solutions to the riddles that befuddled past republican thinkers. Size, social diversity, and possessive individualism were not very appropriate building blocks for popular government, but the Founders turned these seeming vices into a novel theory and practice of republicanism. Rather than relying on community, public spiritedness, or social equality as foundations for republican government, Federalists held to “an amazing display of confidence in institutionalism, in the efficacy of institutional devices for solving social and political problems.”

The Founders' science of politics entrusted to the impersonal artifice and mechanics of the Constitution's structures and procedures the virtuous qualities past republicans insisted must be instilled in citizens. In the famous argument of Federalist No. 10, the endless and natural pursuit

of property is transformed into a mainstay of institutional stability. The geographical scope of America makes it difficult for coherent majorities to form around fundamental issues. Size expands the number of factions and makes communications between them remarkably difficult.

The Constitution extends the qualities started by nature. An imposing apparatus of checks and balances, divided powers, and complex procedures ensures that a common popular will might never gain the upper hand. At the same time, the supporters of the Constitution could tout their republican credentials by arguing that in the final analysis all government offices originated with the people. The result has been a federal government erected by the people but distant from their immediate concerns and malign passions: "Because the new federal government was designed to prevent the emergence of any passion or sense of oneness among large numbers of persons, men could now argue that 'virtue, patriotism or love of country never was nor never will be till men's natures are changed a fixed permanent principle and support of government.'"⁵

Faith in institutions as a source of order, control, and preservation of individual liberty is coupled with the Founders' trust in clipped and concise therapies for political diseases. Threatened with disorder, the institutionalist mechanism responded with a sudden harmony, with all its parts working together. Institutionalists, distrustful of common passions, were nonetheless precise when detailing how wars were to be declared and fought, taxes collected, black slaves counted, and rebellions quelled.

The institutionalist project establishes a political vocabulary of system, mechanism, control, realism, skepticism, and "facts." Suspicious of political associations, institutionalists have effectively bottled up those that have existed and deflected passions away from politics into the private realm. If collective passions were eliminated from politics, individual and group passions flourished in the economic marketplace. Assuming the undesirability and impossibility of changing human nature, institutionalists crafted and maintained the constitutional system as a permanent solution to innate human foibles as they manifested themselves in revolutionary America.⁶

As we shall see in a moment, political scientists have doubted the validity, efficacy, and utility of the institutionalist vision, even as they have had to confront it as the most powerful part of our political tradition. But they have also taken on an opposing vision of political society, as deeply engrained if not as successful as the first. From Thomas Paine to the Populists, from evangelicals to Locofoco craftsmen, radical democrats have

challenged institutionalists and their self-proclaimed realism. To Paine, the purifying waters of revolution offered freedom from institutional entrapments. American society was “a blessing in every state, a loving and indulgent patron tolerant as nature herself of the variety of being and experience.”⁷

To radical democrats such as Paine, political society did not need the imposition of an impersonal machine, but had to encourage the continuous experimentation and impromptu forms of popular power associated with equalitarian democracy. Popular virtue and sentiment—not neatly defined procedures—had to be the basis of republican community. And such energy was best expressed through political bodies close to the people, if not directly controlled by them. Protesting against the Constitution, western Massachusetts farmers declared it “absolutely necessary that the whole people should be active in the matter of government.” Republicans “cannot surrender their privileges as citizens; they cannot be withheld from without.”⁸

The Articles of Confederation may very well be the most characteristic document of radical democrats. In contrast to the present Constitution, the Articles’ procedures were makeshift, and much was assigned to the Congress, the states, and their impromptu actions on the premise that the best government was one that was visible to and controllable by average citizens. To those concerned with national power and future expansion, the Articles offered few comforts. Only tentative and—to institutionalists—ultimately unworkable procedures were established for the collection of taxes, the making of war, the quelling of civil protests—all concerns much on the minds of the institutionalists. Trusting power to radical state legislatures, the Articles allowed what the Constitution forbade. In pre-Constitutional America, the specter of social leveling was as strong as the suspicion of a powerful national state.

The conflicts of institutionalists and democrats have formed the fundamental contours of American political debate and the extent of its future flexibility. As successful state builders, institutionalists have greased the wheels of their creation. The ubiquity of procedural battles, materialist analysis, and the self-interested conflict of factions and groups vindicates the institutionalists’ claims about political society. But so, too, has the stream of radical democratic practice continued to flow, often below ground, but sometimes breaking through to the surface. The institutionalist logic has not entirely defeated what Norman Jacobson calls “the

diffuse, protean, frequently contradictory demands of human nature.” Nineteenth-century American political history is pockmarked with anomalies that defy the institutionalists’ suspicion of collective political action. Religious evangelicals, utopian communitarians, abolitionists, Radical Republicans, populists, labor militants, and the dissenting youth of the 1960s—whatever the differences among them—continually sprout up in the formal gardens of the institutionalist republic of power, size, and grandeur.⁹

The Third Tradition: Beyond Mechanics and Spontaneity

Whatever the huge philosophical conflicts between institutionalists and radical democrats, leading political scientists have looked upon them as a kind of dialogue of the deaf. In their reciprocal archaism, both stand together as much as they conflict separately. Carried over to the profoundly transformed world of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the modern proponents of each tradition have frozen structures, dispositions, and behavior into patterns of thought and practice formed in the agrarian republic. In their substitution of institutional contrivance for conscious human agency, in their fear of democratic majorities, and in their preoccupation with political order, institutionalists created and maintained a system that balanced power against power at the cost of neglecting the healthy and virtuous participation of citizens acting through politics. Almost by design, institutions in America have shredded political impulses of all kinds and have broken democratic majorities. Strangely, radical democrats started from different assumptions but created similar effects. Suspicious of concentrated power and distant institutions, they created a fondness for local democracy and hostility to national institutions. As the country grew, radical democrats immersed themselves in the effort to maintain face-to-face relations in communities that were being destroyed by forces beyond their control.

The consistent claims and most persistent definitions of a new science of politics in America rest heavily on replacing these two traditions with a new public philosophy. Not just a new method and organization of political studies, the American science of politics is also a kind of preventive medicine concocted for a sick polity. In place of the creaky and impersonal edifice of the nineteenth-century state, political scientists have sought a national state staffed by trained experts and supported by responsible and virtuous popular

democratic majorities. If observers from Hegel to Samuel Huntington have noted the peculiar paradox of an innovative and changing American society contained within a stagnant and provincial polity, our political scientists have sought to close that gap between economic and social change and political provincialism. Firm admirers of political power carefully and judiciously exercised, enthusiastic about the rise of bureaucracies in the private and public world, liberal political scientists have wondered why elites and masses alike always divide, balance, and fragment political power, even as they adore private associations as the hallmark of “freedom.”

But political scientists have not been American Bismarcks. Theirs is an attempt to mold a new state with what they see as native American forms of democratic legitimacy. The rough, autocratic, and militaristic image of the absolutist states of Europe need not appear here because state-building in America could only come at the crest of a popular democratic wave. In major part the impulse to found and practice a science of politics in America stems from this simple, if difficult, aim: How is it possible to build a sovereign, democratic, national state in a country whose major political traditions have defined democracy and limited power in ways contradictory to the effort?¹⁰

A particular definition and claim for the scientific outlook guides the answers political scientists have made to this question. Theirs is a cultural definition of the scientific ideal. Not only a method of study, social science is more important as a peculiarly American disposition to political thought and practice. Against divinely ordained ethics, opposed to all sanctification of authority, hostile to all determinisms, the “spirit” of the American science of politics is captured in its belief in the essential malleability of all social phenomena to human will and knowledge.¹¹ As humankind subjected natural forces to their will, so too could they channel social and economic processes to conscious and informed choices and purposes. There were compelling reasons to believe that a science of politics provided essential knowledge of previously uncontrollable social and economic processes. Democratic citizens, unlike bacteria, rocks, viruses, or microbes, were both the subject and object of investigation. If the forces shaping the modern world were presently mysterious and thus seemingly beyond human control, political science promised to end this unnecessary ignorance. Knowledge of these forces catalyzed a deeper collective search for destiny made possible by public awareness of the essential flexibility of modern societies to rational choices. In *Drift and Mastery*, Walter

Lippmann provides perhaps the clearest statement of the essentially democratic character of the scientific outlook:

Science is the irreconcilable foe of bogeys, and therefore a method of laying bare the conflicts of the soul. It is the unfrightened, masterful and humble approach to reality—the needs of our nature and the possibilities of the world. The scientific spirit is the discipline of democracy, the escape from drift, the outlook of free men. Its direction is to distinguish fact from fancy, its enthusiasm is for the possible, its promise is the shaping of fact to a chastened and honest dream.¹²

Lippmann's juxtaposition of contemporary drift with the promise of future mastery indicates a fundamental disenchantment with the present. His ambition is typical of most liberal claims. In the last one hundred years, these claims have been comprehensive and extensive enough to warrant labeling them a distinctive public philosophy, a kind of "third tradition" dating from at least the late nineteenth century. It is the first concerted intellectual response to what Marx called the "creative destruction" capitalist industrialization in America spawned. As such, the third tradition takes its peculiar place among other historically rooted ways of thinking in America.

Scholars such as Woodrow Wilson, Lester Ward, Arthur Bentley, and Theodore Lowi can be brought together around not only what they oppose, but also around what they propose by means of their new science. At the very least, third tradition thought coheres around the following themes.

Modernism as Channeled Flux

As their critique of the American political past suggests, third tradition scholars have attributed to ignorance and false consciousness the features of industrial modernity that most Western European thinkers have seen as the inherent and structured conflicts, the pain and turmoil typical of mature capitalism. American scientists of politics have seen no systematic features of modernity that necessarily thwarted human freedom or progress. Against Marxian or Weberian thought, theirs is an unambivalent philosophy of triumphant modernism. The only impediments to historical progress are said to exist in the historical residue of premodern thinking as it works its dangerous way in the modern world. Once knowledge is

accumulated and gained, conflicts thought to be endemic in modern society can be rationally controlled, mediated, and contained justly, equitably, and democratically. The essential harmony of industrial society is especially noteworthy in America where the absence of hard-and-fast class and religious divisions makes modern consensual democracy possible. Scientific knowledge helps Americans free themselves from the few constraints of their own history.¹³

Sovereignty and the State

To institutionalists, the state is ultimately a punisher. At best it prevents conflicts from reaching the political realm. To radical democrats, the state appears as a mailed fist, a basic violation of the fraternal instincts of democratic citizens. Third tradition political scientists have conjured up an image of the state as a benign and conscious reflection of, and actor for, an interdependent society. Among these third tradition political scientists is an almost complete absence of anxiety or fear about the role of any future American state. The despotic tendencies evident in state-building elsewhere can be easily avoided in America.

The new state in America has been an imperative and could be a blessing provided it could establish expertly organized instruments of domestic sovereignty and definitive spaces where authoritative decisions could be made about a whole range of increasingly politicized issues. Dear to political scientists has been the idea of separating the realm of politics from administration. More a desideratum than a datum, the concept is typical of the challenge offered to America's two traditions by political science modernizers. If the distinction were employed as public philosophy, it would revolutionize the practice of American government. The rule of law would return in the form of "democratic formalisms." Policy and legislation might be informed by expertise and implemented by a bureaucracy noted for its loyalty, accountability, and professionalism.

Some of the most trenchant critiques in political science history have explored the divergence of political practice from political potential. Bureaucratic advocates, political scientists have lamented the politicization and discretion of the bureaucracies they have advocated. Democratic devotees, political scientists have called on the president, Congress, and political parties to reassert their democratic authority.¹⁴

Citizenship and Legitimacy

Third tradition political scientists have been suspicious of static views of human nature, including those of institutionalists, radical democrats, socialists, and others. Citizens are thought to be neither benign, self-seeking, productive, nor innately incapable of judgment. Above all, they are malleable and flexible depending on the conditions of the epoch in which they live. Whatever else they are, citizens and their energies and support are deemed essential to the survival of modern democracy.

Inimical to the modern spirit is the idea that citizens are by nature greedy, self-seeking, and irredeemable. Citizens can be taught that the essence of democracy is rapt attention to national issues. They can be instructed in loyalty and prompted to use the state as their own instrument of experimentation and innovation. The problem, of course, is that Americans have been badly educated. They tend to equate democracy with individualism, the marketplace, and freedom from state control. But if citizens were better educated—if they were imbued with the rationality that comes from scientific thought—they could begin to make responsible choices. Narrow class interests, prejudices, ethnic loyalties, and all other provincial ideas might erode.

Interest group politics, federalism, hostility to modernism: All are the kinds of features that can be weeded out of the American political lexicon. The conflicts that people now take seriously are unnecessary because they are products of ideologies and false consciousness.¹⁵

Civic Education

No one has placed more confidence and hope in civic education as a vehicle for social change than liberal political scientists. Educators and schools have been assigned the task of creating a common national culture, captured in the ideas of innovation and experimentation—the spirit of science—that is said to be the essence of a free society. A reformed educational system has been assigned the task of weeding out archaic, premodern attitudes. To be sure, democratic educators avoid “value judgments.” Far from propaganda, education in democracies shapes the individual’s high sense of political efficacy. It creates an outlook free of rigid ideologies or irrational belief in messianic leaders. Charles Merriam,

perhaps the most enthusiastic proponent of national civic education, well expresses the relationship between reform and educational innovation: “The broader education of humanity, the new forms of intercommunication, the larger resources of scientific inquiry—these are factors which are likely to force a readjustment of the bases of the political order and which require the development of techniques of government upon a wholly different plan from that upon which it has hitherto rested. . . . Politics as the art of the traditional advances to politics as the science of constructive intelligent social control.”¹⁶

The Search for Reform Politics

The possibility of social and political harmony, the necessity of state-building, the scientization of public discourse, and the transformation of public associations all combine to form the public agenda of third tradition political scientists. Their definition of science itself promotes such hopes and claims because it promises a kind of intellectual order that dashes all hard-and-fast ideas about political association, even as it attacks all notions of necessary and inevitable revolutionary breaks with the past. But how could this ambitious agenda be realized? How could scientific politics be made real in the polity? Almost by the nature of the claims themselves, the success of political science has depended on communication to a wider audience and public outside the discipline. But which publics would most likely be receptive to this agenda? And how could intellectual influence be exerted on them to change their political direction?

While Western European intellectuals attached themselves to ongoing movements opposed to capitalism or put themselves at the service of the time-honored institutions of order and hierarchy, Americans, as usual, proved their own peculiarity by organizing themselves into autonomous professions. Modern professions emerged in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For social scientists, professional organizations became ways of establishing intellectual credibility and influence above “mere” partisanship and advocacy. The drive to professionalize, of course, implied insulation from the rough-and-tumble world of politics outside. Professionalism created a detachment said to be conducive to dispassionate research, observation, and studied reflection. But at least in political science and the other social sciences, this particular choice reflected a desire to establish forms of intellectual and political authority

as truth-sayers as well as an attempt to influence the polity outside. Professionalism in American political science emerged not as a retreat from politics but as a way of expressing new and distinctive political claims.

At least in part, the drive for professionalism had its origins in forthright political choices—in roads *not* taken. There were few Karl Kautskys, Friedrich Engels, or Eduard Bernsteins in American political science. American political scientists shunned political parties as symptoms of a disease, not as vehicles for their philosophy of history. Labor and agrarian radical movements were culturally and politically alien to the temperament of the first social scientists as well, not necessarily because of their politics or their goals, but because of their stridency and methods. And, at least at first, few friends could be found among the elites of American politics and business. The American state bureaucracy was full of patronage appointees, people ill-disposed to bend to the rationalist claims of scientists. Robber barons were too selfish and narrow-minded to even care about attempts to achieve reforms and class conciliation. To form independent professions was more than anything a defensive choice, a recognition of nonpolitical alternatives. In the new universities of postbellum America, young scientists of society could conduct long-term, nonpartisan research. Political influence might come later by virtue of the obviously benign and reformist consequences that could be drawn from political research.¹⁷

This nineteenth-century choice has had a profound impact on the later rapport between political scientists and political reformers. Profession-builders became inextricably tied to the broader intellectual agenda of political research in America. The creation of universal standards for admission to and promotion within academia helped to flatten heterodox views among American intellectuals if only because heterodoxy could be channeled into research and work that met accepted standards of merit and “professionalism.” Differences in opinion surely could exist, but they could not go too far beyond intellectual debate within the profession. The belief that there was, or could be, a “cumulative” science of politics in which each scholar’s work responded to or built on that of his or her predecessors helped to establish a continuity of concerns and language among scientific students of society.

Third tradition political scientists have embraced professional organizations and standards. Adopting the professional ethos has enforced a consistency of political claims and a continuous perspective on the sources of disorder and crisis in America. Professional structures have

also sustained a continuous view about how influence on the polity might be gained. Political advocacy always has taken place through the profession by combining advocacy with aspirations toward scholarly objectivity.¹⁸

But the very continuity of this shared perspective over the last hundred years suggests a gap between political and professional ambitions and claims on the one hand, and their extremely minimal impact on the course and direction of American political life on the other. Rather than a cumulative enterprise, political science is better seen as a repeating record with frequent variations on a theme. Successive generations of scholars return to older ideas and claims of their predecessors, often with the sense that they are making some path-breaking political and intellectual discovery. The source of these perpetual new beginnings is located in the failed aspirations of third tradition political science itself. Here is scholarship that depends for success on the vindication of its claims in the reconstruction of the American state and the reeducation of American citizens. The whole point of forming a profession has been to establish an authoritative voice to which ordinary citizens and elites alike defer. Lippmann referred to “the shaping of facts to an honest dream” as the spirit of science and of democratic politics. But when third tradition political scientists have made their forays into the world of politics, they have often encountered illusions and non-facts. Retreats and reentries into politics have characterized the professional life of the discipline’s leading thinkers, and this cycle has been repeated often enough to call it a pattern. Political activity has thrust third tradition political scientists into public roles as sponsors of governmental reorganization, new economic and social planning schemes, and reforms of the two-party system. Retreat often comes after the success of policies and the failure of their overarching philosophies. The first to sponsor liberal legislation, political scientists have been the most trenchant and bitter critics of reform for its minimal effects.

The chapters of this book trace the democratic delusions of reform political scientists. Ultimately, the essential intractability of the American political character is what most depresses political scientists. Introspection always sets in when “scientifically” verified possibilities are ignored or mangled by the public political scientists designate as reform vanguards. For some reason, these liberal publics always fail to heed the scientific message even though it is always advertised as the locomotive of history and the “science of the possible.”

At least five distinct twists of this cycle can be identified. In chapter 2,

“The Impulse toward a Science of Politics, 1880–1900,” our investigation begins with Lester Ward and Woodrow Wilson, among the most important founders of social science in late nineteenth-century America. Ward is usually considered the founder of American sociology, and Wilson refused to call himself a political scientist. Yet both of them were active in the professionalization movement of the 1880s and 1890s. Both men established an agenda for political studies in America. Advocates of the administrative state, they both predicted it would breathe “free American air.” Critics of the status quo, they were optimistic about the prospects for reform. Each located reform publics, deeming them popular carriers of the scientific worldview into the wilderness of the contemporary American polity. Enthusiastic and hopeful in their youth, both lived to see their optimism dashed.

Chapter 3, “Science as Muckraking: The Cult of Realism in the Progressive Era,” spans the early growth years of the political science profession between the turn of the twentieth century and World War I. The Progressive movement’s apex fueled the enthusiasm of scientific reformers and raised expectations about a sea change in American political habits, thoughts, and practices. Charles Beard and Arthur Fisher Bentley are this movement’s left-wing scholarly representatives. Beard and Bentley created a bare-bones science of politics whose mission was to strip institutions, ideologies, and seemingly random political processes of their ideological pretensions and ersatz justifications. Each dredged up disturbing facts about the forces behind the social and economic processes shaping American politics. Both highlighted these facts in order to stir popular outrage and catalyze political action. The great middle class, each believed, was the natural corrector of abuses.

Bentley’s methods inspired future generations of professionals. Beard’s political activities and didactic histories expanded the numbers and concentrated the activities of a growing and aggressive political science profession. Yet this radical political science always diverged from the designs of its architects. In the 1920s and 1930s, both Beard and Bentley became disillusioned with the profession they helped to build.

After World War I, political scientists responded to the failures of Progressivism by withdrawing into the university. Progressive political science was said to be methodologically immature and insufficiently organized to be effective in stirring reform. Chapter 4, “Reform and Disillusionment in the New Deal,” looks at this scientific orientation, best represented in the

works and lives of Charles Merriam and his student and colleague, Harold Lasswell. Theirs was a scientism designed to locate the secrets of political behavior in order to modify citizen attitudes. Both Lasswell and Merriam radically expanded the organization and influence of political science. The potential of a planned and expertly administered reform state was combined with efforts to transform citizen beliefs and eliminate premodern prejudices. Under Merriam's leadership, political science was supposed to become the "pure science of democracy," an alternative to the totalitarian sciences of Stalinism and fascism. Just revealing facts to a "reform public" was considered insufficient. Acting through the New Deal and Roosevelt's benign leadership, the new political scientists believed they could and would create a public respectful of science and democracy.

Most of Merriam's hopes for a liberal future died with the Second New Deal. Conservatives in Congress rejected his efforts to introduce peacetime economic planning and to implement a national policy of civic education. And the climate of post-World War II America was hardly hospitable to reformers and tinkerers such as Merriam. Chapter 5, "The Behavioral Era," is set in the era of the cold war and the great American celebration, when most of the critical perspectives in political science were replaced with an "objective orientation." Behavioralists of the 1950s and 1960s made Merriam look like a scientific primitive or a utopian dreamer. Behavioralists christened as the very definition of democracy the apathy and popular ignorance of politics Merriam derided. Still, there was an undercurrent of anxiety and fear in the writings of otherwise uncritical behavioralists. V. O. Key's and David Truman's works explored the "latent" manifestations of crisis and conflict beneath the seeming harmony of the period. Fearful that the American state was losing its legitimacy, Key and Truman worried about the rise of "potential interest groups," euphemisms for race and class conflicts.

Behavioralist quiescence combined with hyperspecialization to exclude from consideration most of the issues that had always worried political scientists—but not for long. Easy assumptions about the health of American democracy seemed a little ridiculous in the face of the events of the 1960s, 1970, and 1980s. The Vietnam War, Watergate, cultural turmoil, and a profound economic crisis all provoked deeper debate about the theory and practice of democracy in America.

In political science, these events reintroduced an older critical spirit,

at least among a significant minority. Yet the “postbehavioral” period is aptly named, perhaps because the title reflects more what a segment of the profession rejected than what political science in America was supposed to be. Since the late 1960s, critics of behavioralism have multiplied. Appeals for radicalism have been mixed with appeals for relevance, and challenges to professionalism have been blended with efforts to make political science relevant again.

Many political scientists have welcomed such pluralism. Yet at the same time, such diversity reflects a great deal of disagreement and confusion about the purposes and aims of contemporary political science. Less and less, scholars talk of science itself as the language of political harmony and reform. More and more, they are skeptical about the validity and prospects of “interest group liberalism.”

Increasingly, research seems to call into question previous hopes for liberal reform. A growing number of political scientists choose sides between philosophies that contradict the aspirations of third tradition scholars. Some conclude that “democracy” itself is to blame. Others fear repression in the form of capitalist reindustrialization and advocate less bourgeois forms of democratic life. Others disguise and dismiss political questions altogether, searching for mathematical formulas that will explain politics. An admirable spirit of mutual tolerance now prevails at professional meetings because each “subfield” is accorded its own panels attended by its own participants. What is clearly missing is that professional coherence that Wilson, Beard, Merriam, and others sought. As liberal assumptions erode in the polity, they die in political science.

Some measure of what has transpired can be seen in the works of Theodore Lowi and Walter Dean Burnham. They ask the same questions their third tradition predecessors asked, but they get very different answers. Lowi calls for “juridical democracy” in a work that shows why achieving it is impossible. Burnham discovers “critical elections” in the American past only to conclude that if we had one now, the results would be far from progressive. Radical liberal hopes are raised in their last chapters, only to be dashed by the discoveries of their own investigations.

In the 1980s, third tradition political scientists have become conscious of the scientific delusions of the past. The political confidence and aspirations of a once powerful strain of liberal thinking have already been shaken.

The present impasse, though, is nothing really new, for similar tensions have been evident throughout the history of political science. In brighter moments, third tradition political scientists have linked the growth of scientific scholarship to the achievements of the liberal agenda. No serious scholar is much inclined to that approach anymore. But to comprehend the present skepticism, the sources of historical overoptimism need to be analyzed.