

**ARTICLE**

Between universality of science and Western provincialism: Unveiling the “imperial gaze” of the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (1930-1935)

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Abstract

This paper examines the imperial gaze that the social sciences could endorse during the interwar period, while attempting to establish themselves as a global field. It specifically focuses on the Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (ESS), an ambitious scholarly undertaking in the social sciences, edited by economists Alvin Johnson and Edwin Seligman. Fifteen volumes were published between 1930 and 1935 in total. By looking at the ESS’ contributors and articles, the paper questions the ambivalence between the universal appeal and rhetoric of this project and the actual outcome, which enforced a core/periphery division in the field of the social sciences. This indicates that, even if the ESS and its contributors defended a progressivist stance regarding colonialism, this scientific enterprise could not escape from the imperial culture that had deeply permeated US and European (social) science.

Keywords

Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences – Imperial gaze – United States – Social Sciences – Imperialism – Progressivism – Circulations

INTRODUCTION

In 1933, the American historian Ralph Gabriel reviewed the seventh and eighth volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences (ESS)* and praised both its quality and ambition:

“The number and the geographical distribution of the writers is impressive [...] There is abundant evidence that the work is maintaining its high standard of scholarship. The editing is intelligent and the proofreading conscientious.” (Gabriel 1933, 526)

However, even though he explicitly referred to its internationality, he criticized what he believed stood for a form of Western narrow-mindedness:

“The ideology of Russia, and of the Western hemisphere south of the Rio Grande finds almost no direct expression in these volumes, which deal with such inclusive subjects as internationalism, imperialism, and government. The single contributor from Latin America



presents only a short biographical sketch. The article on the Kuomintang instead of being written by a Chinese intellectual appears over the signature of two Westerners from Nanking University. The long discussion of the Indian question is written by an Englishman. In such a selection of authors the volumes reflect the provincialism of Western civilization” (Gabriel 1933, 527).

This ambivalence between, on the one hand, the international character of the *ESS* which aspires to codify a global social science, and on the other hand, the circumscribed focus on North America and Europe regarding its selection both of topics and contributors perfectly epitomizes the purpose of this paper.

The *ESS*, a colossal work of fifteen volumes, was published between 1930 and 1935. It represents the first attempt to achieve a state of the art in the social sciences on an explicitly global scale. The project was first sketched by American sociologists in the early 1920s, and then supervised by two economists, Edwin Seligman and Alvin Johnson, both trained at Columbia University, where Johnson, then director of the New School for Social Research, was once a student of McVickar Professor of Political Economy, Edwin Seligman. The project was conducted under the auspices of ten U.S. disciplinary associations that delineated *de facto* the boundaries of what was called the “social sciences” during this period, i.e., the disciplines of economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, statistics, social work, history, education, law, and psychology.¹ The choice of the format was not incidental: an encyclopedia, as a genre, necessarily appeals to an imaginary that goes back to the Enlightenment.² By claiming this legacy, a symbol of European erudition, the American social scientists stated their intention to assert their intellectual independence, without breaking up with the old continent. Nearly 2,000 researchers, from the United States and abroad, participated in this gigantic undertaking, consisting of approximately 2,000 topical articles and 3,000 biographical notes. Given its stated ambition and unprecedented scope, the *ESS* constitutes a reliable observatory of the social sciences in the interwar period.

By focusing on the *ESS*, this paper exposes some apparent contradictions regarding internationality, universalism, colonialism, and imperialism. As hinted by Ralph Gabriel’s allusion, even though the protagonists behind the *ESS* were very vocal about their universalist intentions, the outcome displayed a quite strict definition of international, limited to the North-Atlantic world. Divided in three parts, this paper explores this ambivalence by first, examining the rhetoric of universality that was put forward by *ESS*’ initiators and attempting to understand how it helped to put the project in motion. Second, it describes how the protagonists of this undertaking conceived the international sphere, by analyzing the recruitment of the contributors, but also by inspecting some articles in the *ESS*. Third, it tackles the issues of imperialist and colonial ideologies in the encyclopedia, looking into its connections with progressivism in the United States; showing how, despite its universalist pretensions, the *ESS* necessarily carried out what sociologist Raewyn Connell (1997) has called an “imperial gaze” on social science, which has been defined as a structure in which the observed find

¹ The American Economic Association, the American Sociological Society, the American Anthropological Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Statistical Association, the American Association of Social Workers, the American Historical Association, the American Psychological Association, the Association of American Law Schools, and the National Education Association.

² A reference assumed by the initiators of this project: Memorandum “An Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences”, undated [1924] (Columbia University Library (CUL), Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (RBML), ESS Records, series I, box 1, folder 47).



themselves defined in terms of the privileged observer's own set of value preferences (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998, 207-208).

This paper is primarily based on archival material, mainly the *ESS* records that are kept at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (RBML) of Columbia University, but also some records of the philanthropic foundations which funded the project. It combines both an analysis of these records and of the *ESS* itself, as well as some quantitative insights and descriptive statistics based on a prosopography (a collection of the contributors' biographies). It also relies on recent works that have described the polarization of the social sciences globally and its consequent inequalities, by highlighting the imperialist ideologies, or the political and academic hierarchies, that underlie these knowledge dynamics (Go and Lawson 2017, Rodriguez Medina 2013, Nugent 2010, Steinmetz 2009, Kramer 2002). In that sense, this paper aligns itself with literature on international relations focusing on hierarchy and demonstrating how anti-imperialist conceptions were connected to and fueled euro-centrist assumptions (Hobson 2014, Bell 2019). The paper therefore connects to studies, in the fields of international relations and history, that seek to grasp the re-formulations of universality and internationalism (Gorman 2019, Long & Schmidt, 2005) as well as its tacit or explicit appeal to universality in scientific discourses (Forman 1973, Schroeder-Gudehus 2012). This current work intends to contribute to this valuable scholarship by zooming in on the case of the *ESS*.³ The historical perspective this paper aims to bring here should, however, document the way global structural inequalities were shaped in the field of the social sciences and how these mechanisms were rooted in a political, economic, and social framework in which politics and science were deeply tied together.

FRAMING THE *ESS*: UNIVERSAL CLAIMS OVER NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

The *ESS* took its initial shape in a national context. Indeed, after the First World War, the U.S. social sciences stood out for their institutional organization, the number of their protagonists, the funds they were allocated by the philanthropic foundations, and consequently the prosperity of their intellectual programs. For example, in 1909, already, more than 170 colleges were offering a course in sociology to their students. In 1923, a graduate student could obtain a Ph.D. in social sciences from at least 15 universities in the United States (Young 2009: 96-103). Between 1923 and 1928, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation alone gave more than \$20 million to social sciences' research projects (Seim 2013: 207). This institutional dynamism largely explains why a project like the *ESS* sprang up in the United States, where all the conditions for its making (both material and immaterial) converged, and why it could hardly have happened elsewhere at this period.⁴ Even though the project was embedded in this U.S. backdrop, its main protagonists immediately deployed a universalist rhetoric, presenting the publication as an international reference work.

Chiefly, the *ESS* was to be used as an affirming tool of the scientific legitimacy and position of American scholars globally at a period when international scientific relationships were redefined. At

³ Among the very few works that have focused even briefly on the *ESS*, the discussion of its international scope remains very superficial and largely unquestioned. See for example this quote from Lentini (2008): "*Se il centro dell'projetta è New York, la proiezione dell'ESS è infatti decisamente mondiale.*" ("If the center of the project [was] New York, the projection of the *ESS* [was] in fact decidedly worldwide").

⁴ After the Second World War, the social sciences formed a more established field, and other major publications sprang up whose international ambitions, like those of the *ESS*, were even more asserted. One could think of the *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (1964), edited by sociologists Julius Gould and William L. Kolb, under the auspices of UNESCO, which was then translated to Spanish (Bayle & Morales 2018).



the inaugural launch of the first volume of the *ESS* in January 1930, American historian Allen Johnson – not to be confused with Alvin Johnson – delivered a speech that clearly emphasized this aspiration:

“The publication of this scholarly encyclopedia marks a definite stage in the history of the social sciences in this country. It is equivalent to a declaration of intellectual independence, for hitherto such large enterprises have been promoted by European scholars [...] But for some time it has been apparent that the old-time deference of American scholars to European masters was passing [...] I see therefore in the publication of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* American scholars shaking off their dependence upon the trans-Atlantic world and assuming their rightful place among the scholars of the world.”⁵

Further on in his speech, he did, precisely, connect this national zeal with the universal claims of science, stating: “Self-reliant scholarship does not mean narrow nationalism [...] So it is that while this Encyclopedia is American in its origin, in its organization, and in its expression, it is universal in its appeal.”⁶ National ambitions were therefore quickly coupled with a rhetoric of universal knowledge that was supposed to assert the scientific character of the social sciences. The reference to “European masters” emphasizes, however, who was specifically pointed out in this discourse. The inclusion of foreign researchers, namely Europeans, was discussed at the inception of the project, so as to claim both its internationality and its legitimacy, and the two were intrinsically linked from the very beginning of this undertaking.

On the level of global scientific relations, American social scientists had, indeed, a decisive move to make. Even though European reference works existed (one could think of the *Dictionary of Political Economy*, originally edited between 1894 and 1901, or the *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaft*, periodically revised and which more recent edition was underway – eight volumes between 1923 and 1929 – when the *ESS* was launched), an American addition could, according to the social scientists from this country, nonetheless, offer fresh perspectives on the field largely invested by old European masters, precisely by instilling a cosmopolitan spirit. American economist Allyn A. Young, who was about to accept the offer of William Beveridge to join the London School of Economics and Political Sciences, thus not the most chauvinistic scholar of the United States, captured this in a letter to Edwin Seligman:

“The three volumes thus far published of the *Handwörterbuch* indicate that it is to be distinctly more German, and less cosmopolitan, than the earlier editions were – and it has always seemed to me that there were somewhat narrowly nationalistic [...] It is now recognized in Europe, I think, that in some respects at least the social sciences have made more rapid strides in the United States than in any other country. An American dictionary, summarizing the remarkable progress we have made up to date, would attract world wide interest and attention.”⁷

It is no surprise that American scholars considered themselves as the appropriate emissaries for this international calling in the 1920s. Even though the United States finally took part in the Great War, and the country did not escape the “intellectual mobilization” (to borrow an expression used in the *ESS*: [Lerner] 1930: 189), academics from this country were more eager to restore unruffled global scientific relationships in the years immediately after the conflict. They therefore deployed scientific

⁵ A. Johnson’s speech at the *ESS* reception, undated [31 January 1930] (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series I, box 3, folder 7).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A. Young: Letter to E. Seligman, 8 March 1926 (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series I, box 2, folder 2).



diplomacy largely based on the rhetoric of the universalism of science, which in return gave them the opportunity to break up once and for all with the scientific provincialism and inferior position they experienced during the nineteenth century (Chagnon 2018). The *ESS* was therefore a material and scientific expression of these redefining global dynamics. Even if the U.S. did not engage in the international structures set up in the 1920s (such as the League of Nations or the International Labor Organization, for example), several scientific, but also political, networks remained heavily invested in the spheres of international organizations, and its protagonists were proactive advocates of this liberal international spirit (Ollivier-Mellios 2018, Brooks 2015, Williams 1954).

This rhetoric of universality was also deployed to assert the scientific character of this social knowledge. Choosing the genre of the encyclopedia was a way to appeal to the Enlightenment, a moment when this congruence between rationality, science, and universality had been truly celebrated. These universal claims precisely offered social scientists the unique occasion to better establish their legitimacy in the scientific field in general, therefore strengthening their position towards natural scientists (Ross 1991). What was at stake was to ascertain the very scientific nature of social sciences. A letter from the Harvard Law School professor Felix Frankfurter to support the project sent to Edwin Seligman insists on this very idea: “I am sure that you and your associates [...] will demonstrate that social problems can be brought under the discipline of a scientific temper as rigorous and as uncompromising as that which governs the so-called natural sciences.”⁸ The *ESS* thus promised to satisfy their appetite, both on a global and a local scale, pushing further along the path of professionalization set out in the late nineteenth century (Ross 2003: 205-237). By taking part in this work, social scientists were promoting their disciplines both within the academic spheres, and to a lay audience, therefore actively participating in the more general societal recognition of social sciences, which could only strengthen their own professional position.

The universal claims of the *ESS* must, however, also be considered in regard to its other key protagonists. Firstly, the philanthropic foundations which decided to fund the project. The *ESS* turned out to be expensive; the final cost being around 1,1 million dollars, almost twice what was initially planned. Despite the large amounts at stake, the foundations – mainly the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY), respectively contributing up to \$675,000 and \$275,000 – chose to stick with the project.⁹ Among various reasons, the universal aspirations of the *ESS* contributed to this collaboration. The American philanthropic foundations, indeed, completely aligned themselves with the international liberal spirit the *ESS* intended to promote, as their own actions, specifically the ones conducted by the RF throughout the world, which again took place at a moment of redefinition of internationalism’s principles and practices, may be compared to the ambitions the *ESS* outlined (Tournès 2007: 188, Rietzler 2011: 46-47). Moreover, by funding a reference work in the social sciences along the scientific lines they brought to the fore – empirical, inductive research that must contribute to somewhat practical changes in society (Bulmer and Bulmer 1981: 369-370) – the foundations were deliberately endorsing a handbook for future research in this field on a global scale.

Finally, this story would not be complete without considering the interests of the publishing house, Macmillan. After meeting with several publishers, Edwin Seligman decided to work with the

⁸ F. Frankfurter: Letter to E. Seligman, 8 March 1926 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series I, box 2, folder 14).

⁹ Confidential monthly report “Publication projects in general and the ESS in particular”, March 1937, (Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RF Records, series 200.S, box 329, folder 3924); G. Brett: Letter to F. Keppel, 11 September 1937 (CUL, RBML, CCNY Records, series III, Grant Files, box 139, folder 14).



multinational company, which could secure *ESS*' sales internationally, therefore ensuring financial profits from various countries and for a longer period. Moreover, having an international publishing home was another way to guarantee a widespread circulation, and to become a reference globally. In this way, Alvin Johnson and Edwin Seligman quickly understood that the universal appeal in tone, that scientific discourses withhold intrinsically, at least in their view, would prove insufficient, and it was to be completed by international recruitment. Alvin Johnson made this apparent to Edwin Seligman, writing that: "Every significant continental name added to our list of contributors will help to create the right atmosphere."¹⁰ And this is what they decided to do.

A PROJECTED MAP OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES' WORLD

In the summer of 1927, after securing most of the funding he was seeking for the *ESS*, Edwin Seligman undertook a journey to Europe to promote the project. After arriving in England, he travelled to Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and lastly, France.¹¹ Earlier that year, Seligman had written to several European scholars to establish a foreign advisory committee for the publication. Five countries were represented: Germany, England, France, Italy, and Switzerland. The preface of the *ESS*, in the first volume, mentions this trip abroad, explicitly trying to put some emphasis on the international character of the work:

"In the course of a trip which included virtually all of the important universities from Oslo to Florence, he conferred with hundreds of the most distinguished scholars scattered throughout Europe. He was both astonished and heartened by the enthusiasm that was manifested on all sides, and by the readiness of virtually everyone to lend his hearty cooperation in what was recognized to be not only a gigantic project but one which would, be of great importance to the progress of the social sciences throughout the world." (Seligman 1930a: xviii-xix)

The phrasing reveals a very polarized conception of the world, since all major universities abroad are located between Oslo and Florence, and the endorsement of the scholars coming from these institutions was largely enough to ensure the success of the *ESS* throughout the world. Indeed, almost all foreign contributors of the *ESS* came from Europe: of the 1958 social scientists who took part in the publication, half of them came from the United States and the other half mainly from Europe.

As we can see, only 5% of the whole group of authors (which represents slightly less than 100 scholars) came from countries outside Europe or the United States. Two thirds of this remaining group were from countries that had received the status of dominion as defined by the Balfour Declaration of 1926.¹² The scholars from these countries, besides being white, had been mainly trained in England or in the United States. Some territories such as the African continent (except for South Africa) and the Caribbean islands (except for one Cuban scholar) were even completely excluded. The remaining 33 contributors were mainly from Latin America and East Asia. The largest community from this group was the Japanese social scientists. From the 11 individuals who were born and (at least partly) studied in Japan, nine had previously undertaken studies abroad, mainly in the United States, and four were currently in the United States when asked to contribute to the

¹⁰ A. Johnson: Letter to E. Seligman, 18 July 1927 (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series I, box 2, folder 14).

¹¹ Invoices for Seligman's trip to Europe, 27 September 1927 (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series I, box 1, folder 20).

¹² This is, in the case of the *ESS*, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa. The Balfour Declaration recognized autonomous communities within the British Empire and conferred them equal status. The dominions, mainly colonies that were ruled by a white European elite, had thus a special form of independence towards the British government.



ESS. This situation exemplifies the way these scientists, coming from non-European countries, were selected. These authors were chosen because of their interpersonal relationships with people closely involved in the *ESS*. This scenario is also true for contributors coming from China, or from Latin American nations.

Table 1: Nationalities of the contributors of the *ESS*

Country	Number of contributors
United States	958
Germany	256
United Kingdom	226
France	122
Russia	62
Italy	49
Austria	42
Canada	40
Poland	32
Hungary	22
Netherlands	18
Belgium	14
Spain	14
Sweden	13
Switzerland	12
Czechoslovakia	11
Japan	11
Australia	10
South Africa	7
Ireland	7
Denmark	5
Norway	5
New Zealand	5
Yugoslavia	4
Argentina	4
India	4
Romania	3
Portugal	3
China	3
Turkey	2
Mexico	2
Chili	2
Cuba	2
Lebanon	2
Finland	2
Latvia	2
Greece	1
Brazil	1
Total	1958



From the 11 contributors from this latter region, three had previous connections with Columbia University, suggesting that they had known Edwin Seligman before they were invited to write for the *ESS*. The recruitment process of these contributors was thus entirely different to the one applied to Europeans: even though the editors obviously reached out to scholars they personally knew, this was not the logic behind the invitation of the circa 900 European social scientists who took part in the *ESS*. This illustrated a strict hierarchy in which Europe represented the center whereas the other regions remained peripheral. European scholars' production appeared as the "implicit reference" to a system of "Euro-normality" that was not at all questioned by the *ESS*' protagonists (Kaviraj 2009: 189). The scientific community displayed in the *ESS* thus delineated a North-Atlantic space geographically speaking, relegating other regions to a subaltern position. The way the main protagonists of the *ESS* envisioned their community shaped a division between a scientific center and its peripheries.

This marginalization was also made obvious by the type of articles that were assigned to the contributors. From the 11 contributors from Latin America, only one, Guillermo Subercaseaux, who worked at that time for the Chilean Central Bank, and who was also Edwin Seligman's friend, wrote a topical article, "Paper Money," while the others were only assigned biographical notices that were brief and less significant. Radhakamal Mukerjee, who was Head of the Department of Economics and Sociology at the University of Lucknow, was also the only Indian contributor who wrote such an article, "Land Tenure in India", a topic he had extensively studied since 1920, the year he received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Calcutta, with a dissertation entitled "Socio-Economic Change in the Rural Indian Community". This means that, not only did these contributors represent less than 5% of the whole group of authors, but also the total amount of their writing was not even equivalent to 1% of the total words assigned in the *ESS*. Additionally, all the contributors coming from these "peripheral" regions were men. Even if women were not excluded from the *ESS* (about 7% of the whole group of contributors, which is low but not insignificant when compared to other major editorial undertakings in this period), they exclusively came from countries in the North-Atlantic region.

Moreover, these researchers were not even invited to write on the subjects that directly concerned the regions they were coming from, as hinted by Ralph Gabriel's review in the introduction of this paper. The editorial team was not completely blind to the issue created by its selection process. For example, the team allocated the introductory part devoted to the development of the social sciences in Latin America to Moises Poblete Troncoso, a Chilean jurist working for the International Labor Organization. Troncoso had accepted the invitation to write it, but submitted a piece exclusively focusing on the social sciences in Chile and Argentina, completely ignoring other countries. Rather than asking him to amend his piece, as he would usually do with other contributors, Alvin Johnson reached out to the American sociologist Luther Bernard. First suggesting that Bernard should fill gaps in the article, Alvin Johnson then simply agreed to have him take care of the whole piece, stating that he will do his best to "try to escape international complications."¹³ The editorial team was thus aware of the risks of antagonizing the Latin American scholars by assigning such articles to a U.S. sociologist, but it did not prevent them from doing so.

Other scholars pointed out the absence of complete regions in the articles of the *ESS*. A month after the publication of the first volume, Philip K. Hitti, a historian born in Lebanon and teaching at

¹³ A. Johnson: Letter to L. Bernard, 19 April 1929 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series IV, box 1, file 135).

Princeton University since 1926, wrote to Alvin Johnson to cancel his subscription to the *ESS*, explaining that:

“The Introduction of the first volume covers the development of social thought and institutions practically all over the world with the exception of the Moslem and Arabic world, and that in spite of the fact that the Arabs were the bearers of the torch of culture and civilization for many centuries in the Middle Ages. The article on Agriculture and its different phases deals even with India, New Zealand, Japan, and Latin America, but has hardly a reference to the Near East.”¹⁴

Even though Alvin Johnson defended its work by explaining that the *ESS* was trying to be comprehensive, but would always suffer from some obvious omissions, this statement highlights the inevitable connection between the misrepresentation of contributors coming from certain regions of the world in a work that advertised itself as “international” and the coverage of specific topics related to these same parts of the world.

Figure 1: Table of contents of the article “Government” in the *ESS* (*ESS* vol. 7 1932: 8).

8 **Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences**

GOVERNMENT

HISTORY AND THEORY..... W. J. SHEPARD

UNITED STATES.....ARTHUR W. MACMAHON

BRITISH EMPIRE

Great Britain.....HAROLD J. LASKI

Dominion of Canada.....ROBERT A. MACKAY

Commonwealth of Australia.....W. K. HANCOCK

New Zealand.....J. B. CONDLIFFE

Union of South Africa.....EDGAR BROOKES

Irish Free State.....ANDREW E. MALONE

British Commonwealth of Nations.....W. Y. ELLIOTT

FRANCE.....MAURICE CAUDEL

BELGIUM.....MAURICE CAUDEL

ITALY.....BOLTON KING

GERMANY.....A. MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY

SWITZERLAND.....WILLIAM E. RAPPARD

THE NETHERLANDS.....A. C. JOSEPHUS JITTA

SCANDINAVIAN STATES

General.....KNUD BERLIN

Denmark, Iceland and Norway.....KNUD BERLIN

Sweden and Finland.....GEORG ANDRÉN

RUSSIA

Imperial Russia.....PAUL GRONSKI

Soviet Russia.....OTTO HOETZSCH

BALTIC STATES.....MALBONE W. GRAHAM

SUCCESSION STATES.....ROBERT BRAUN

BALKAN STATES.....R. H. MARKHAM

TURKEY.....ALBERT H. LYBYER

SPAIN AND PORTUGAL.....JOSÉ OTS Y CAPDEQUI

LATIN AMERICA.....HERMAN G. JAMES

JAPAN.....KIYOSHI K. KAWAKAMI

CHINA.....ARTHUR N. HOLCOMBE

In his reply to Hitti, Alvin Johnson addressed the issue of the universality in the *ESS* from a new angle. Indeed, if the *Encyclopaedia* had to be international, the situations explained, and the examples given in the articles should also be geographically spread. However, the space limitations prevented the enumeration of all cases from every country. Two solutions were available: either to break down general thematic articles by adding subsections for each specific regions (the article on Government, for example, is of that kind, divided into 28 subsections, see figure 1), or to dedicate entire articles to specific geographical areas. Hence, the *ESS* contains such articles as “Chinese Problem,” “Egyptian Problem,” “Near Eastern Problem,” “Philippine Problem” to cite a few.

However, this appellation is worth noticing: the description of specific political, social, and economic events that had happened or were underway were indeed precisely framed as “problems”, and only

¹⁴ P. Hitti: Letter to A. Johnson, 28 February 1930 (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series IV, box 4, folder 144).



regions outside the North-Atlantic world were labelled this way. Even in the 1930s, this choice was challenged. Asked about the list of prospective articles titled “race relations,” the historian Charles Beard questioned the pertinence of the word “Problem”:

“Why “Chinese Problem” [...] What is a problem? Who makes it a problem. (*sic*) Everything is a problem from the problematical point of view [...] A problem assumes a point of view and a solution, real or possible.”¹⁵

Johnson honestly recognized that the title was “lazy,” but a way to synthesize the Chinese situation: “We want to concentrate on that nest of relations that come up out of Occidental penetration. The problem is such from our point of view.”¹⁶

The perspective was thus the key: the way these issues were framed remained a fundamental element of the analysis provided. Since most contributors came from Europe and North America, the *ESS* was reflecting, willingly or not, their standpoint. So, under the rhetoric of universality of science, the grounding of scientific practices still displayed deep inequalities, since scholars from what was considered as the core, would impose their categories upon those coming from peripheries. It is thus no surprise that the “Chinese Problem” article begins with this statement:

“The first of these two problems is one which has repeatedly arisen in Chinese history and is apparently the result of a constitutional malady of the traditional Chinese social and political system. It seems to spring from the inevitable degeneration of imperial dynasties and the consequent incapacity of the reigning houses to produce an indefinite succession of rulers capable of performing satisfactorily the exacting social and political duties required of occupants of the Dragon Throne.” (Holcombe 1930a: 431)

Those words were written by Harvard University professor of Political Science, Arthur N. Holcombe, who had travelled to China at the end of the 1920s and had just published a book on the Chinese Revolution. His approach to Chinese politics in the *ESS* must be understood through the faith he had put in Chinese revolutionaries and their ability to reform the country and to move towards modernity. His views on China were, in fact, more nuanced than this statement suggests, and he praised enthusiastically this “scholastic Empire” in which “scholars played a more important role [...] than in any other great empire” (Holcombe 1937: 40). But, to Holcombe, as to many of his contemporaries, modernity meant adopting a western-style system, in politics, but also in social and economic fields, informed by the American social sciences. In May 1930, he signed a paper for the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, in which he underlined the importance of Harvard graduates in the Chinese revolution:

“The extent of their influence surprised me, although it is not surprising that graduates of American colleges should take a prominent part in the revolution, since the most important fact in the whole revolutionary process up to the present time is the seizure of power in China by men with Western educations or under the influence of Western ideas, and American colleges have taken the lead in furnishing the new China with such men and such ideas.” (Holcombe 1930b: 983)

Holcombe repeated this connection between a beneficial revolution within Chinese society, and what he envisioned as “the West” at the end of his *ESS* article, reaffirming his faith towards Chinese people

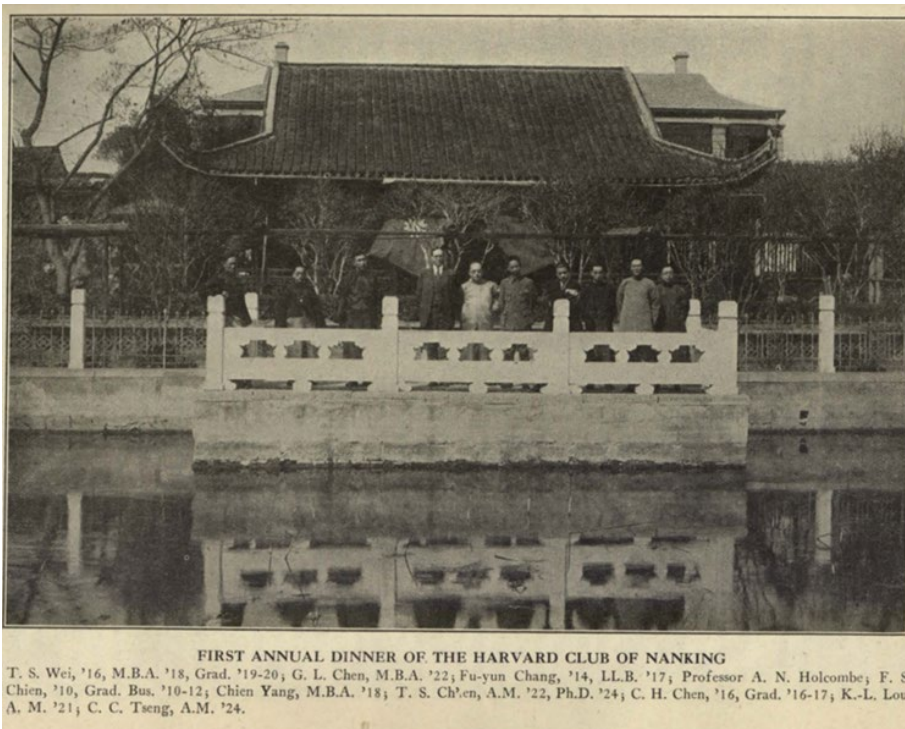
¹⁵ C. Beard: Letter to A. Johnson, 14 October 1930 (CUL, RBML, *ESS* Records, series II, box 4, folder Race Problems).

¹⁶ A. Johnson: Letter to C. Beard, 15 October 1930 (*Ibid*).

to “regenerate their state [...] unless [...] their exposure to the influence of the West [would be] thoroughly brought to an end.” (Holcombe 1930a: 435).

Again, these statements capture how U.S. scholars praised cosmopolitanism, but always framed their ambitions to place the United States at the center of a new scientific geography. The openness towards the rest of the world was thus restricted by this “Western” focal perspective, or as Kaviraj would put it, the West acted as the north of the compass.

Figure 2: : Arthur N. Holcombe and Chinese alumni from U.S. Colleges (Holcombe 1930b: 985)



PROGRESSIVISM, COLONIALISM, AND IMPERIAL CULTURE IN THE ESS

Arthur N. Holcombe was not at odds with the mainstream of the U.S. social sciences during those decades. His trajectory was even emblematic of this developing field: born in 1884, he graduated from Harvard University with a Ph.D. dissertation in economics, which dealt with the public ownership of telephones. Holcombe later worked for the Massachusetts Minimum Wage Commission and advocated for several progressive reforms.¹⁷ He maintained a keen interest in politics and juggled with these occasional commitments while teaching at Harvard University. When the Department of Government was established in 1910, he joined it immediately and began to study American political parties (Maas 1979: 278-279). Overall, Holcombe did not stand out from most of the contributors to the *ESS* who were leaning towards the left-wing of the political landscape, an

¹⁷ I use “progressive” as an umbrella term for a different set of various and dynamic ideas that were elaborated at the end of the 19th century in the U.S. and under the same impulses in the social thought, as historian Daniel Rodgers had tried to qualify it (Rodgers 1982).



involvement they often demonstrated by taking an active role in special commissions or other peripheral positions in politics.

Those researchers were not very supportive of colonialism or imperialism and were rather sympathetic towards the independence claims of colonized countries, which they had often visited, as the example of Holcombe shows. These journeys certainly opened them to new cultures and inevitably nuanced their opinions on the alleged superiority of the white man, participating, for example, in the replacement of naturalist explanations with cultural schemes, less racist in their conceptions (Degler 1993). Their perspectives were also aligned with the stated anti-colonial agenda of the progressivist representatives in the U.S., even if literature has rightly complexified the narrative around the equation that linked progressivism to anti-imperialism, showing how key progressivist politicians ultimately promoted imperialism, and how more left-leaning representatives were thus differentiating themselves from a “mainstream” progressivism by adopting a clear anti-imperialist stance (Dawley 2003, Johnson 1995). Other studies have also insisted on the connections between progressivism, pragmatism, internationalism, and this anti-colonial stance that was, if not effectively observed, still highly advertised and a rallying point among its advocates (Throntveit 2008). The article “Indian Question” signed by Henry N. Brailsford, a British journalist, who had visited India in 1930 and became an ardent promoter of Indian independence, contained an explicit statement in that direction: “It is manifest to all but a minority of Englishmen that their direct rule over a subject dependency cannot continue. It is no longer a question whether self-government is desirable; it is inevitable.” (Brailsford 1932: 673).

Brailsford was a close friend to Alvin Johnson who stayed at his cottage when he was visiting England during the summer and the two men certainly shared their political opinions.¹⁸ This pledge regarding the independence of India was, however, not accepted by all researchers. George F. Shirras, Professor of Economics at Gujarat College in Bombay, complained about the article to Edwin Seligman, regretting that the editorial team had assigned this paper to a biased researcher.¹⁹ Although Seligman immediately rejected the criticism by affirming his trust in Brailsford’s abilities and knowledge,²⁰ the episode reveals the tensions behind this issue of the independence of colonized countries, a subject that was still debated among social scientists globally.

The main contributors to the *ESS*, i.e., those who wrote numerous articles or topical ones, however, supported the colonized people’s cause. Writing about the “Philippine Problem,” in which the United States had a direct involvement, the political scientist Roy Veatch, who graduated from the Brooking Graduate School, like many members of the editorial team, concluded with an explicit vow:

“One may be forced to the conclusion that it [the Philippine problem] never will be permanently solved until the Filipino people become an independent nation able to work out their own destiny in a world which will not require them to appeal to arms either for the achievement or for the maintenance of their independence.” (Veatch 1933: 115).

The same could be said for the article “Backward Countries” whose label could also sound very imperialistic. The tone of its author, Melvin M. Knight, an historian also very close to Alvin Johnson, was, however, going against the Dollar diplomacy of the country (Rosenberg 1999):

¹⁸ H. Brailsford: Letter to A. Johnson, 25 August 1934 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series IV, box 2, folder 55).

¹⁹ G. Shirras: Letter to E. Seligman, 27 October 1932 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series IV, box 10, folder 83).

²⁰ E. Seligman: Letter to G. Shirras, 20 November 1932 (*Ibid*).



“Considered from this practical angle of neglected opportunities, the connection of backwardness with imperialism becomes clear. Remote peoples—even those living under primitive conditions—are not backward in the context of their own culture. It is only when these regions are brought into the circle of economic imperialism that their neglected economic possibilities take on significance.” (Knight 1930: 380)

So, despite the titles of the articles, the content of the *ESS* appeared less colonialist, but the framing remained the same, exclusively focused on what the protagonists called “the West”. The other parts of the world, if not completely absent, were only considered from the perspective of the scholars coming from Europe and the United States.

This one-sidedness of the *ESS* is also visible through the topics related to “race relations”. The label “race relations” was quite famous during the 1920s and the major American philanthropic foundations were financing studies exploring this issue (Seim 2013: 133-37). The prospective list of entries related to “race relations” (the same Charles Beard received) was almost exclusively sent to white scholars. The only African American scholar who received it was Abram L. Harris, who was finally asked to write the article “Negro Problem,” together with the American political scientist Sterling G. Spero. The *ESS* marginalized the Afro-American scholars the same way it did with researchers coming from regions outside the North-Atlantic space: only five Afro-Americans took part in the *ESS*, and Harris was the only one who was assigned a topical article which, again, he had to share with a white scholar. During this period, Harris had been appointed at the Department of Economics of Howard University and had received his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Nonetheless, his selection was most certainly less due to his recognition as a brilliant economist, than to the fact that he personally knew several members of the editorial board, being himself involved in several socialist activists’ groups (Genizi 1972: 248-249). Even if the article “Negro Problem” was indeed progressivist in its outline, highlighting how “Negro inferiority” had been wrongly established,²¹ the editorial team did not offer Black scholars many opportunities to express their voices in the *ESS*, even though in the 1920s and 1930s, Black colleges were quite numerous (more than 70) and enrollment reached peak levels (Redd 1998: 35, Allen & Jewell 2002: 244-247). Articles related to the notion of race were also all given to white scholars, mainly anthropologists who defied the simplistic racial explanations. However, the invalidation of a truly racist science did not equal the inclusion of Black scholars, whose participation remained therefore incidental.

Besides the marginalization of groups of scholars, and its impact upon the content of the *ESS*, it was the definition of the social sciences themselves that the protagonists of the *ESS* had in mind that enforced another layer to these core/periphery dynamics. When asked to define what “social sciences” encompassed during the discussions preceding the launching of the project, the instigators of the *ESS* remained very vague. Even though the introduction to the first volume opens with a section entitled “What Are the Social Sciences?” written by Edwin Seligman, the characterization was still formulated in very basic terms. Seligman thus simply defined the “social sciences” as the sciences related to the “phenomena of the mind”, later calling them “cultural sciences” without giving more precision (Seligman 1930b: 3). This difficulty in settling on a precise definition can be explained by the plurality of the intellectual programs those sciences comprised. What made social sciences stand

²¹ The authors write, for example: “The insistence upon white supremacy is based upon the doctrine of Negro inferiority [...] In various mental test Negro groups have scored lower than whites. But detailed and careful analyses of army alpha and numerous other intelligence tests indicate that whatever the causes of divergence in mental scores – and education and economic opportunity seem to be important factors – race offers no clear-cut explanation for them.” (Harris & Spero 1933: 353-354)



together was not the topics they would cover – which could be very broad – nor the methodology – which could also be diverse – but rather a common performative ambition towards society in general that could be defined as progressivist.

In 1933, Chicago welcomed the International Exhibition entitled, “A Century of Progress.” Obviously, science – in general – had a major place in this exhibition, since it was depicted as the motor of this progress. The American sociologist Howard Odum elaborated a plan in which the social sciences also had their place in the Hall of Science. To Odum, as to many social scientists,²² science had led to major progress in industry, which completely transformed society, but also led to major societal issues. This was the mainspring of the social sciences: to heal society from its social scars, to establish a true democracy where no one would be left behind. Of course, this story did not seduce the main protagonists of the Exhibition, as it put a damper on the narrative of progress surrounding science and industry and this initiative was simply abandoned (Jordan 1994: 185-190). This episode, however, reveals the conception the American social scientists had of their field: it was a form of knowledge that was elaborated to resolve issues created by industrialization, a conception that has been successfully transmitted until the very present (Connell 1997: 1511).

In *Unthinking Social Science* (2001), Immanuel Wallerstein demonstrates that the concept of “Industrial Revolution” played an important role in generating the inequalities in the field. He argues that the narrative surrounding the “revolution” that took place in Great Britain around the end of the 18th century results from a peculiar perspective focusing exclusively on European history that served the ideological agenda of Europe’s hegemony. In the *ESS*, the article “Industrial Revolution” written by the British economic historian Herbert Heaton, then teaching at the University of Minnesota, played indeed a prominent role: it was one of the most referred to articles through the cross-references in the whole publication (with 76 citations). Besides this notion, the fact that the American social scientists conceived the social sciences as a remedy for the problems of industrialized society inevitably impacted the spatial dynamics enforced in the *ESS*. Other countries could potentially have a few scholars studying their society, but as a field, the social sciences were born into industrialized societies and therefore a product of the North-Atlantic world.

Overall, it appears the *ESS* exhibited a more progressivist stance than the “region-problem” label would suggest, but this progressivist pledge was underlain by a narrative which ultimately made the social sciences the very product of Western culture. Combined with the imperial culture that infused the entire American and European society of the period (Kaplan 1993, Go 2013), this perspective imposed a core/periphery perspective on the work which inevitably contributed to the marginalization of certain regions of the world and the construction of the hegemony of others.

CONCLUSION

In 1931, reviewing the first volumes of the *ESS* for the *Annales*, the French historian Marc Bloch commented on the international character of the publication:

“Most of the members of its editorial board are American: the only language used is English. There is nothing particularistic, however, in the general design of the enterprise. Without losing

²² Dorothy Ross has convincingly shown how U.S. social scientists addressed what she has called the “crisis of American exceptionalism” trying to “counteract the ill effects of industrialization” (Ross 1991: 96).



anything of a certain color of soil, which it would have been very regrettable to see dissipating, it is resolutely, healthily international: by the recruitment of its collaborators —if the United States provided the highest number of them, all the other principal nations, beside them are represented —by the choice of the studied questions, which touch the whole world, by the spirit of the study, absolutely foreign to any bias.” (Bloch 1931: 391)

It is well worth noting the choice of Bloch’s vocabulary: resolutely, healthily international. When faced with such a word, one can only conclude that part of the universal ambitions of the *ESS* were achieved, even though only a small portion of the world was involved in its conception. In the tumultuous global political context of the early 1930s, the *ESS* certainly stood out for its internationalist pledge, in the eyes of a European liberal such as Bloch. Indeed, while it emerged in a U.S. context, it was immediately framed into an international setting. To the instigators of the project, this publication should assert the brand-new hegemony of the United States in the social sciences. In a post-war context, the U.S. scholars were in a great position to restructure international scientific relations by playing the card of scientific diplomacy, when European nations were still holding grudges towards one another. The editorial team was, however, very conscious of the necessity to include foreign scholars into their encyclopedia to make it a truly global reference. This explains why nearly half the contributors came from Europe. The scholars from non-Western cultures were, however, completely marginalized. They would represent only a small portion of the contributors and were only asked to write small pieces, mainly biographical notices. The articles related to specific regions outside the North-Atlantic space were also given to U.S. or European researchers who applied their own perspective to the situations they were describing. Indeed, this very narrow recruitment, geographically speaking, for a work that boasted of being international or even universal, inevitably led to content that was also focused on specific issues and parts of the world. This situation was also encouraged by the editorial team, who made clear their intentions to privilege the Western perspective on the world.

In that sense, the *ESS* indeed displayed an imperial gaze. Protagonists of the *ESS* could not escape this imperial gaze as they were embedded in a society largely infused with an imperial culture, as the sociologist Julian Go has shown in his work (Go 2013, Go & Lawson 2017). It explains why this core/peripheries dynamic was established since, according to American or European scholars, the best research – the highest-level works – was accomplished by scholars coming from the North-Atlantic space and therefore, ignoring researchers outside these boundaries had virtually no effect upon the quality of the work. Of course, their own perspective and definition of the social sciences as an industrial product made their assumption regarding their scholarly domination a self-fulfilling prophecy. The perspective these social scientists adopted made them unable to see the social sciences in the “peripheral” regions (at least what they considered to be so) as anything but an “exported” product of Western societies. Moreover, this understanding was even widespread in these non-Western regions. In his piece on the development of the social sciences in Japan, Japanese sociologist Teizo Toda, professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, stated that “Sociology, like other branches of the social sciences, developed under western tutelage.” (Toda 1930: 321) The identification between the social sciences and the West, almost defined as an epistemological category, had thus been accepted outside the quite restrained circle in which it was built and has remained unquestioned for a long time.²³

²³ For recent debates regarding the Chinese case, for example, see Chen 2021.



It does not mean, however, that the *ESS* reproduced a conservative outlook: actually, the content of the articles was rather progressivist, generally supporting the nationalist aspirations of colonized people and decrying the economic greed of colonial great powers (including the United States). It is worth mentioning that this was not always the case for every scientific discipline. Recently, Davis (2021) has demonstrated how the specialty of international relations in Australia, for example, conveyed a conservative agenda, being largely infused with settler colonial ideas. The *ESS* took an opposite political stance. Still, this ideological agenda could not supersede an imperial complex in which Western societies were embedded and which completely structured their frame of thought. Even though social scientists in the *ESS* were mostly opposed to colonialism and imperialism, it did not prevent them from maintaining a hierarchical conception of the world that impacted the knowledge they produced.

But, as the quote from Marc Bloch demonstrates, the main objectives of the *ESS* regarding its internationality were satisfied. This reference work also epitomizes a crucial moment in the restructuring of the social sciences globally. The leadership of the United States in that field has been achieved during these interwar years, and what happened during the period after the Second World War was only a continuation and a reinforcement of dynamics that had taken root before. Commercially speaking, the encyclopedia sold well, even though it was published during a major and global economic depression. It was even a commercial success in a wide range of countries. China and Japan, for example, became an important market for the *ESS*.²⁴ A few attempts to translate the work were also discussed, but never came to fruition. The proposals came mainly from Latin America, to translate the publication either into Spanish or Portuguese, and one was formulated by Egyptian officials to work on an Arabic version.²⁵ So, despite its narrow internationality in practice, the *ESS* was eventually recognized as a reference work even in regions that were left out of its scope. In this, its attempt to codify a certain version of a global science was successful. The analysis of both its contributors and its content, as well as the archival investigation, nonetheless prove that more than a global science, the *ESS* promoted a “globally oriented” social science (Nugent 2010: 7), revolving around a new core: the United States.

²⁴ R. Hutchinson: Letter to E. Todd, 18 February 1932 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series I, box 3, folder 18).

²⁵ E. Seligman: Letter to N. Butler, 22 May 1934 (CUL, RBML, ESS Records, series I, box 1, folder 11); G. Brett: Letter to R. Fosdick & G. Jessup, 17 January 1945 (CUL, RBML, CCNY Records, series III, Grant Files, box 139, folder 14); H. Latham: Letter to Carnegie Corporation of New York and Rockefeller Foundation, 27 October 1950 (*Ibid*).



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