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Social Science, the Social Question, and the Formation of Elites: German Social Science Student Associations (1890s-1900s)

Sciences sociales, question sociale et formation des élites. Les associations étudiantes de sciences sociales en Allemagne (années 1890-1900)

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- 1 The birth and development of social science during the nineteenth century are now well documented (Joly 2017; Moebius & Ploder 2018; vom Bruch 2006; P. Wagner 1990). On the contrary the role of social science in the creation and training of intellectual elites, prior to its organisation into university curricula, remains less studied. Yet it is at the crossroads of a set of issues central to the academic, scientific, and political history of the turn of the twentieth century. A range of disciplines, which were in some cases scarcely established at university level and as-yet poorly differentiated, aroused simultaneously a strong attraction among the (future) intellectual elite as well as an open hostility in both academic and political fields. The explanatory power of social science and its use in solving the problems of modern society thus became the subject of conflicts.
- 2 These conflicts were especially concentrated around the definition of the legitimate model of the elite and the type of education that ought to lead to it. This model referred in Germany to the place in society of the *Bildungsbürger*, members of the intellectual bourgeoisie socially defined by their intellectual education (Conze & Kocka 1985). At the end of the nineteenth century, students¹ were considered to be future elites who had to be educated in the social functions that they would be required to perform as such (Weber 2008). From this perspective, and owing to growing antagonism between increasingly specialised curricula and maintenance of the generalist ideal of the

Bildung, a process of individual educational training and self-cultivation (Lepsius 1992; Ringer 1969), many students sought to acquire knowledge and skills in addition to their academic training.

- 3 At the same time, Germany's industrialisation – which occurred at a much more intensive pace than in other European countries (Hahn 2011) – made the *soziale Frage* (literal translation of the French phrase *question sociale*, i.e. social question) a central issue of the public debate. At the end of the century, the social question, in the singular, encompassed all the issues relating to the ongoing transformations of industrial societies, whether this be of workers, labour, morals (prostitution, alcoholism), or living conditions (housing, health, etc.) (Ritter 1998: 1-4). An object of political struggle, its resolution was then integrated into the functions of elites. The foundation of the *Verein für Socialpolitik* (VfS) in 1872 attests to this. This Association for social policy was the main place for meeting and for reflection for the intellectual and bureaucratic elite in search of an intermediate path between economic laissez-faire (“Manchesterism”) and socialism (Plessen 1975; P. Wagner 1990: 79-85; Zimmermann 2001: 51-60). This concern aroused the growing interest of German students in social science, as a way of understanding the social world and, above all, as support for science serving the social function of elites: the development and legitimisation of social science, on the one hand, and the preoccupation of elites to resolve the social question, on the other, went hand in hand.
- 4 Students thus mobilised social science to intervene in redefining the legitimate model of the elite. The *Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereinigungen* or *Studentenvereine* (social science student associations, SwSv) which were established in many German universities during the 1890s, formed the heart of this mobilisation. Only two articles have so far been written about these associations (Burger 1991; Köhnke 1988). Yet their history sheds light on the obstacles and tensions surrounding the empowerment of social science and its role in resolving the social question. The SwSv, having enjoyed a certain attractiveness, were also the focus of heated political conflicts, thus making visible the ambiguous role of social science in Wilhelmine Germany.

Sources

There are few archives on the SwSv, with no newspapers or annual publications. To compensate for this lack, the newspapers of the national federations of three types of student corporations (Burschenschaften, Corps and Vereine Deutscher Studenten) were studied for the period 1890 to 1914², as well as the archives of the Prussian ministry of ecclesiastical and educational affairs (each State which made up the German Empire, founded in 1871, had responsibility for its education policy), and those of four universities (Berlin, Bonn, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, and Heidelberg). These archives contain correspondence, association statutes, lists of members and lectures, and press clippings. I have consulted the transcripts of lectures delivered at the SwSv, in the rare cases in which these have been published in pamphlet form or in a journal.

- 5 First, I will show that the emergence of these associations was made possible by the encounter between the development of social science and the rise of the social question in academic and student life after the unification of Germany in 1871. I will then emphasise the fact that it was the centrality of the social question which underpinned students' engagement in these associations and determined the meaning they

attributed to social science. Finally, I will show that the academic and political repression of the SwSv meant that students' actual ability to engage in public life was limited.

1. Social Science Student Associations in the German Student and Academic World

- 6 While the rise of the *Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine* was a product of the competitive character within German student associationism, their formation was more precisely fostered by the intense discussions around the social question and social science which were then stirring the university world. However, there were a range of factors behind their creation, to which corresponded a varied disciplinary recruitment.

1.1. Student Associationism

- 7 In the 1890s, student associations were a massive phenomenon in Germany. Around one in two students was part of an organisation. Reconsidering the role of intellectual education, debate around the social question, and investment in social science helps to show how the SwSv fitted into this landscape of associations.
- 8 During the second half of the nineteenth century, corporations with elitist recruitment politics and practices (*Verbindungen*) largely dominated student life, especially in small and medium-sized universities such as Heidelberg, Bonn, and Marburg, and to a lesser degree in the big universities of Berlin, Munich, and Leipzig. The most prominent were the *Corps* and the *Burschenschaften*, where the imperial high society socialised (Jarausch 1982; Zwicker 2011). The vast majority attributed little importance to intellectual education or debates and issues of the time, scorning the organisation of conferences or reading groups in favour of strengthening internal cohesion through drinking sessions and academic fencing. Anti-intellectualism dominated, but there was a dynamic within some corporations from the last decade of the century onwards which led to the promotion of intellectual education among members, reinforcing their university attendance and promoting the study of social, political, and economic issues.
- 9 This education played a key role in other forms of student organisations, such as the *Vereine Deutscher Studenten* (VDSt, Associations of German students), the *Freistudentenschaft*, and various scientific associations. Members of the nationalist and anti-Semitic VDSt organisations placed their political, civic and, to a lesser extent, intellectual education among their main ambitions, alongside the struggle against all the "internal enemies" of the Reich: Jews, Socialists, and Ultramontane Catholics. Their programme also built on the *Kaiserliche Botschaft* of 17 November 1881 in which Emperor William I announced future social measures for workers (vom Bruch 2000)³. Hedwig Roos-Schumacher put together a sample of 2,875 lectures delivered in different VDSt from the beginning of the 1880s up until 1914: 668 (23.2%) focused on economic and social policy issues (Roos-Schumacher 1987: 71).
- 10 More generally, students continually declared their status as the future elites of the country. Beyond providing useful training for their professional careers, they conceived of their period of education as preparation for the social role they believed they would play. With the exception of medicine, university curricula remained loosely

structured, despite many criticisms of increased specialisation. Students were encouraged to follow a relatively broad education, in accordance with the ideal of *Bildung* at the heart of the social functioning of the educated bourgeoisie (Vierhaus 1972). These social rather than intellectual requirements underpinned the great success of small scientific associations in law, medicine, natural science, philology, and many other disciplines.

- 11 At the beginning of the 1890s, a process of reclassification of student organisations began. The *Burschenschaften*, having led the fight for the national cause, moved closer to the aristocratic model of the *Corps* after the unification of the country. At the beginning of the Wilhelmine period they intended to take first place in support of the Empire and the nation at the university level, and they were challenged in this by the VDSt. Study of the social question then became a matter of competition between members of the *Burschenschaften* and the VDSt, and, more generally, an attractive goal for a growing portion of students.

1.2. University Students' Study of the Social Question: Between Science and Politics

- 12 In the years following German unification, academic research in social science experienced a new development. Between 1885 and 1895, texts were published which are held as sociological models today, such as Ferdinand Tönnies' *Community and Society*, 1887, and Max Weber's survey of agricultural workers east of the Elbe, 1891-1892 (P. Wagner 1990: 101-106). Despite these (now) prestigious productions, the term "sociology" remained problematic in Germany (Feuerhahn 2014). It was the term "social science," as a collective or in the plural form, which was used by German authors around 1900 – the exact opposite to what was happening in France, where "the term 'sociology,' compared with the expression 'social science', became fashionable." (Mosbah-Natanson 2011: 107) Wolf Lepenies even goes so far as to say that sociology was "foreign to the Germans." Some academics, notably the historians heirs of Leopold von Ranke, made a fundamental criticism of sociology as a scientific discipline (Lepenies 1990: 247-253). Above all, sociology came up against "political rejection," because "not only did it recognise the scandalous rupture between society and the state, but it even approved it, as a necessary condition of its right to scientific existence. ⁴" (Lepenies 1990: 232 and 234). And this was in a context of the "the dominance of state-centric views of science [...] implying the close connection between knowledge and governmental activities" (Sala 2017: 575).
- 13 At the same time, a growing number of academics ambioned to study the social question scientifically – so as to address it through adequate social policy. This intermingling of science and expertise can be found even in the title of the prestigious journal *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (*Archives for Social Science and Social Policy*), in which Max Weber published several of his main texts. As with the term "sociology" in France, academics were certainly not the only ones to use the term "social science." On the contrary, senior civil servants, lawyers, and doctors also published in social science journals. Cohesion and coherence were then lacking. Indeed, "social science" at the time described "neither a precisely defined field of knowledge nor a clear disciplinary classification." (vom Bruch 1997: 260)

- 14 Among these various disciplines, *Nationalökonomie* (political economy) of a trend referred to as of the historical school was enjoying a golden age in universities (Gläser 2014: 33-40; Grimmer-Solem 2003). The most famous professors were also those who most actively engaged in public debate on the social question, such as Lujo Brentano, Gustav Schmoller, and Adolph Wagner. All three were among the founders of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*. In 1910, there were forty-five chairs of political economy in Germany, almost all of the forty-nine chairs that could be tagged as “economic and social science” (von Ferber 1956: 198)⁵. Conversely, Tönnies regretted in 1913 that “sociology does not yet exist for the university administration in Germany and Austria” and that on the contrary, there existed chairs and courses which advertised as sociology but without following its methods (Tönnies 1926: 172)⁶. Indeed, courses including the term “sociology” were taught at some institutions in the 1900s, but we do not know their content. The call launched in 1914 by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* (DGS, German Sociological Association), founded in 1909, for the creation of chairs of sociology remained unanswered on account of the war. The first chairs were established in 1919 in two newly founded universities. They were not limited to sociology and were held by economists, both members of the DGS: its secretary Leopold von Wiese became the holder of the chair of “science of the State and sociology” in Cologne, while the physician (1885), then university doctor (1908) and accredited professor (1909) in economics Franz Oppenheimer held the chair of “sociology and theoretical political economy” in Frankfurt/Main for ten years (Lichtblau 2014; Sala 2017). Before the war, social science specialists were only able to partially establish themselves at universities, despite their disciplines being attractive.
- 15 Students, as future politicians, physicians, senior civil servants, or academics, received special attention and invited reflection on the “good relationship” that they had to maintain with the social question (Philippi 1895; Gerlach 1901). In particular, Brentano, Schmoller, and Wagner attracted to their classes wide audiences of students of economics, law, cameral and State sciences (Laborier *et al.* 2011), or history. They played an active role in the SwSv, promoting them and giving conferences for them. As a result, they held sway over SwSv members and their approach to the social question and social science. This influence was twofold. First, these scholars and SwSv members put partisan politics aside and affirmed science’s autonomy, although they could not escape a confrontation with politics. Wagner devoted his inaugural address as rector of the University of Berlin in October 1895 to “academic national economy and Socialism,” (A. Wagner 1895) and repeatedly defended SwSv against suspicions of them having social-democratic beliefs: this was to better highlight the scientific approach of political economy and of these associations. Second, the affirmation of the autonomy and of the scientific nature of social science was mobilised to promote the idea that only science could resolve the social question. From this perspective, general education within and outside the university and the social utility of science went hand in hand. Economists’ moral support for the SwSv can be explained by their effort to rally support from (the younger generations of) the educated bourgeoisie for their ideas: to defend the general interest in the face of struggles between the bourgeoisie and the working class, to approach, understand, and educate the working class, and to save it from socialism. Brentano, for example, gave a conference in 1890 on “the role of educated people in the social question” to members of the VDSt in Leipzig and, seven years later, on “the role of students in relation to current socio-political duties” before those of the SwSv in Munich (Brentano 1890; 1897).

1.3. An Interest in Social Science Without Studying Social Science

- 16 Neither the involvement of academics in debates on the social question nor student interest in social science were unique to Germany. In other European countries, students were similarly seen as the future elite, who had to be trained to carry out social functions. In England and Scotland, where debating societies were prominent, social problems were increasingly discussed by students around 1900 – although less than political issues – and sociology or social science associations were formed (Anderson 1988; Dockerill 2018). In France, students organised many conferences within their associations, some of which focused on social issues of the time or on the emerging social science⁷. Knowledge of the people became a major issue for some French students at the turn of the century in the wake of the Dreyfus affair (Moulinier 2002: 187-196). In Germany, most of the *Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine* were created in a very short period of time between 1893 and 1897, and had many common points. But it was not a nationally structured movement. Local factors prevailed over their formation, which resulted in strong variation between recruitment pools from one university to another.
- 17 The first SwSv was founded in Göttingen in 1893 by students connected with professors close to the *Evangelisch-sozialer Kongress* (Evangelical Social Congress) – a series of meetings between theologians, economists, and lawyers to find resolutions to social problems based on Protestant ethics. The religious dimension was important within the association, which was mainly composed of theology students who considered ministers' knowledge of social and political issues to be insufficient (Burger 1991: 119). In the same year, a similar association was founded in Berlin, independent of this Protestant movement. In June 1895, the president of the SwSv of Berlin mentioned the existence of at least eight other associations in Germany, in Breslau, Erlangen, Freiburg im Breisgau, Greifswald, Königsberg, Halle, Leipzig, and Tübingen, as well as one in Vienna (Schultze 1895a: 469).
- 18 At several universities where they were powerful, members of corporations joined together to create a social science association, and VDSt members publicised this (Mumm 1894). This strategy provided a large recruitment pool and ensured that new associations were under their control, so that they would not fall into the hands of social democrats. More broadly, it reflected the interest of students in the social question and in social science. At Halle, three organisations (Burschenschaft Alemannia a. d. Pflug, VDSt, and the Theological Association) were listed as such on a list of SwSv members⁸. This was also the case in Heidelberg, where members of four disciplinary scientific associations (law and State sciences, Protestant theology, mathematics, and philology) formed together with a general scientific association called *Freie Wissenschaftliche Vereinigung* (Free Scientific Association) and the VDSt a Federation of Social Sciences (*Sozialwissenschaftlicher Verband*) in January 1896. It was reformed in July 1897 under the name *Sozialökonomische Vereinigung* (Social-Economic Association)⁹.
- 19 Student interest in social science was not expressed within the university as an institution of knowledge dissemination, but rather on its fringes. This is evidenced by the fact that they did not tend to advocate the creation of social science chairs, and they created their associations outside faculties and all curricula¹⁰. This is largely due to the fact that those who joined the SwSv did not generally train to become social

scientists, as shown by the disciplinary distribution of members of three associations (Table 1). According to Köhnke (1988: 321-324), only three members of the Berlin SwSv wrote a thesis in philosophy, and only one on a sociological subject. The latter, Theodor Kistiakowski, presented his thesis on “Society and the Individual: A Methodological Survey” in Strasbourg in 1899, and studied with Georg Simmel when he was in Berlin.

Table 1. Recruitment by faculty or discipline for three associations

SwSv	Date	Faculty of Philosophy	Medicine	Law	Protestant theology	Cameralism	Nat. Sc., chemistry, maths.	Agriculture	Total
Berlin	Nov. 1895	14	13	26					53
	1901/1902	15	6	13					34
Halle	1895	10	14	23	84	5 ^a	5 ^b	7	148
Freiburg	1902	4	1	7		2	4 ^c		18
	1907/1908	8	2	3 ^d		7	2 ^e		25

^a of which 1 was also in law and 2 in agriculture; ^b 2 natural science, 2 chemistry, 1 mathematics; ^c in chemistry; ^d also in cameralism; ^e 1 in chemistry and political science, 1 in mathematics.

In Berlin, the faculty of philosophy brought together the literary disciplines, the humanities, social science and natural, physical, and mathematical science.

Sources: Berlin: Köhnke 1988 and list of members of 6 February 1902, GStA PK, I. HA Ref. 76 V^a Sect. 2 Tit. XII Nr. 17 Bd. 2; Halle: handwritten list of 12 June 1895, GStA PK, I. HA Ref. 76, V^a Sect. 8 Tit. XII Nr. 10 Bd. 1; Freiburg: handwritten lists at Universitätsarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau (hereafter UAF), B1/2659.

- 20 These often limited numbers of members should not obscure the fact that the conferences organised by these associations were, in the vast majority of cases, open to other students, and even to the public. These conferences constituted the core of members' activity.

2. Scientific Study of the Social Question

- 21 Members of social science student associations took a scientific study-approach to the social question, as did their teachers, in order to work towards its resolution. This required, in their opinion, students to meet “the people” in order to understand them – a meeting made real through lessons for workers. These lessons and the conferences presented before the SwSv testified to the predominance of the social question over social science.

2.1. Social Question Over Social Science

- 22 On the evening of the reopening of the Berlin SwSv in October 1895, Ernst Schultze, president of the association, gave a conference on “Students and the Social Question.” He was a student of natural science at the time, later switching to political economy and sociology. The ideas that he developed brought together ideals espoused by the majority of students involved in social science associations and by the professors who supported them. Schultze called on students to actively engage in solving the country’s social problems, as their predecessors had in the unification of Germany. In order to do this, no utopia would suffice, particularly one of social democracy, which Schultze attacked repeatedly. Young university students, “on whom the future of the German people rests,” (Schultze 1895b: 12) must certainly not be indifferent to the plight of workers, but this “compassion” must be based only on the scientific study of social problems. This concerned all students, since they would be confronted with the social question whatever their future profession, making its scientific study a duty. This study was therefore not an end in itself for Schultze, but a means of participating in the resolution of social problems – a means that he regarded as apolitical: like others¹¹, he emphasised the need to avoid partisan tendencies. The organisation of conferences must promote this study.

Fig. 1.



Ernst Schultze, *Die Studentenschaft und die soziale Frage. Festrede auf der Eröffnungsfeier des sozialwissenschaftlichen Studentenvereins zu Berlin am 1. November 1895* [Students and the social question. Speech given at the inaugural event of the Berlin Social Science Student Association on 1 November 1895], Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895, flyleaf.

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- 23 The purpose of these conferences was to allow students to learn more about the problems of the time and to debate them. After each presentation, time for discussion and questions was planned. These conferences could be delivered by members themselves, but students looked above all to invite teachers and other personalities to talk about various subjects. The attention paid to the social question was to the detriment of the academic study of social science in two ways. First, in form (since it was delivered via conferences and not lessons), and, second, in substance (the social question as a contemporary problem rather than social science subjects as disciplines). It is impossible to know precisely all the lectures that SwSv members organised or planned, since none of them published a periodical or pamphlet presenting its activities. The subjects of the lectures that we know about show interest in a wide range of subjects. Célestin Bouglé, who attended the Berlin SwSv for a semester as a student, testified to the eclecticism and to the practical aspect of the topics discussed: “One day, someone will talk about English socialism compared with German socialism; someone else, at the next session, will talk about idealism and materialism in sociology; someone else will talk about anti-Semitism; someone else will report on a visit to workers’ housing.” (Bouglé 1895: 92-93)¹²
- 24 The 56 conferences given to associations in Berlin (30), Bonn (1), Halle (1), Heidelberg (14), and Munich (10), for which we have access to at least the title, are proof of both the diversity of the profiles of speakers and of the eclectic nature of the subjects discussed. The speakers include: twelve students (mainly in Heidelberg); fourteen higher-education teachers; five journalists and/or writers; four politicians¹³; two physicians; an economist, a jurist, a senior civil servant, a naval officer, a pastor, a high school and a primary school teacher; and six persons of unknown status. Higher-education teachers represent nearly half of the speakers whose status is known, not including the students. They were almost the only ones to give several conferences. This is unsurprising given their academic legitimacy and their proximity to the students. However, it was not only academic skills in social science that were behind an invitation to give a presentation. Experience was enough. For example, doctor Leopold Löwenfeld addressed the Munich SwSv on the subject of “the student and alcohol” from a hygienist point of view (Löwenfeld 1910). Moreover, even social science specialists preferred to speak about contemporary problems rather than social science.
- 25 The social question and social reform were indeed central, with themes such as housing, alcohol, and prisons. Several speakers dealt specifically with workers and their forms of organisation: in Berlin, G. Schmoller spoke about trade unions in England, M. Weber – whose 1891/1892 survey was conducted for the *Verein für Socialpolitik* – about agricultural workers, Ignaz Jastrow about social security, and in Munich, J. Timm about trade unionism in Germany. The economy, trade, and banking, sometimes from a historical perspective, formed a second notable set. Within the Heidelberg association, classical economic doctrines were regularly presented, such as those of Physiocracy, Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo. Agriculture, art, education, demography, and crafts featured more sporadically. Speakers discussed the moral duties of the educated bourgeoisie – and of students in particular – towards workers, or their indispensable investment in the social question. In addition to the talks by Brentano and Schultze already mentioned, we can cite that of the pastor and liberal politician Friedrich Naumann in Berlin in October 1896 on the “social duties of the educated youth.” Some more political topics were sometimes discussed. The

preacher, journalist, and writer Bruno Wille proposed to his Berlin audience in 1894 a “critique of the Erfurt program” of the SPD; the following year Georg Simmel attempted a “psychology of socialism.” Moritz Julius Bonn, economist, founder and first director of the College of Commerce in Munich, discussed “national colonial policy” in Munich in 1910¹⁴. In 1901, social democrat E. Bernstein asked the Berlin SwSv: “How is scientific socialism possible?”

- 26 The authorities feared that the SwSv, in proposing to discuss the various problems of the social question, would serve as a forum for socialist agitators. But it was sometimes the opposite camp that made use of it. During the first event of the Bonn SwSv, a theology graduate delivered a lecture on the Christian Social Movement, which was in fact just an apology for the movement’s founder, the preacher Adolf Stoecker, and his anti-Semitic party. Eberhard Gothein, an economics professor and member of the Vfs, regretted during the discussion that the talk was merely a presentation of a political programme, whereas the association’s real purpose was to confront students with “social science issues¹⁵.” He warned students against political activism and called on them to maintain a neutral scientific outlook.
- 27 The pre-eminence of the social question over social science was also demonstrated in forms of practical engagement with workers: Schultze dedicated the end of his lecture to the idea of student participation in the education of the people. The creation of the SwSv preceded the organisation of lessons for workers by several years, but these two phenomena resulted from the same dynamic: the need for students to commit to solving the social question, and in order to do so they had to learn how to know the workers and seek to reduce the distance between them and themselves. In France, “popular universities” (*universités populaires*) arose were created out of the Dreyfus affair, partly based on the model of the English University Extension Movement (Mercier 1986). In Germany, the first “student classes for workers” (*studentische Arbeiterunterrichtskurse*) were initiated in the winter of 1900-1901 by members of the *Freistudentenschaft*¹⁶ of the Technical College of Charlottenburg. In Bonn, these classes were co-founded by a member of the *Burschenschaft Alemannia* during the winter of 1908-1909 (Oppermann 1925: 174). In Freiburg, members of the SwSv began organising classes, which were taken up again in 1909 by an extended committee¹⁷. A federation of academic classes for workers (*Verband der akademischen Arbeiter-Unterrichtskurse Deutschlands*) was established in 1907, to which twenty-four organisations were affiliated in 1910 (Schoßig 2011). They primarily taught basic skills (reading, writing, and counting). A pamphlet claims the figures of 900 students involved and 7,000 workers and employees participating throughout Germany during the winter semester of 1909-1910¹⁸. The idea was that, whatever their future professional career, they needed to be equipped with knowledge of the people in order to be successful in it¹⁹.
- 28 Preference for the social question partly explains the greater success of worker classes over social science associations. This also explains that the SwSv did not actively participate in the development of social science at university.

2.2. The Absence of a Definition of Social Science

- 29 The SwSv were not a place for the epistemological or methodological debate of social science. The conference themes show that the term “social science,” as used by the SwSv and their speakers, covered very diverse and undefined realities. The few lectures

where social science was central to the theme confirm this point. In the winter semester of 1898-1899, two historians covered social science at the Berlin SwSv. Ignaz Jastrow spoke about study of the subject, and Kurt Breysig approached the theme of “sociology and the social question.” In Munich in 1909, left-wing liberal jurist and specialist in labour law Hugo Sinzheimer detailed his sociological method in private law.

- 30 Sinzheimer's and Breysig's conferences provide a better understanding of the place of social science within the SwSv and more generally in the public debate²⁰. Sinzheimer intended his method as a means of moving from the objective textual study of law to a study of the use of law by men. He explains the utility of this approach as “relating private law research to reality – to its questions and its doubts” and “helping ensure that life, which permeates and has permeated other social science disciplines, also encompasses private law.” (Sinzheimer 1909: 3) His sociological method therefore consisted in describing social reality in order to bring law “to life.” Breysig, who says that he wishes to remain on theoretical ground, does not propose an approach to a sociological study of the social question. In his view, socialism has an economic essence rather than a social one, and its political and scientific opponents have a far more sociological perspective on the social question. However, at the beginning of his presentation, he seeks to define sociology. According to him, sociology consists in studying relations between men according to norms that define the fate of the “atom” (the individual) – in a word, in “teaching individuality.” (Breysig 1899: 450) Further on, he defines sociology as the mother of social science: “Political economy as well as, for example, jurisprudence, political theory, and perhaps also ethics, are daughter sciences of sociology (Breysig 1899: 456).” After considerations on the theme of the individual and the group so broad that they become blurred, he hopes in conclusion it will be possible to study the issue objectively, despite political attacks by the most conservative and revolutionary.
- 31 It is indeed the many issues involved in the social question and more generally contemporary issues that, beyond their heterogeneity, connect all the themes raised before the social science student associations. It could hardly be otherwise, owing to the absence of a unified definition of social science, which is clear in the case of sociology. The definition of sociology as a theoretical and empirical science of the social and its clear distinction from other social science disciplines as well as from expertise (*Sozialpolitik*) were more problematic in Germany than in other countries, for example the United States (Sala 2017). Ten years after Breysig, at the first congress of the Sociological Society, participants still defended heterogeneous or even incompatible definitions of sociology, even those participants whom we consider today without hesitation to be sociologists, such as Weber, Tönnies, and Simmel (Joly 2017: 153-231). The reason for this vagueness was that, for contemporaries, the ideal of the unity of science – which included a rejection of disciplinary specialisation – remained a dominant dogma. While Durkheim was in favour of scientific specialisation, Weber presented it, in his lecture on science as a vocation, given in 1917 and published in 1919, as acquired and inevitable, but not as positive in itself (Ringer 1992: 304-307). Tönnies wrote in 1913 that what had been needed for a long time was the development and teaching “of a general ‘theory of society’ [*Gesellschaftslehre*].” “Sociology, he continues, is just another name for that, and can mean nothing else; a name no more beautiful but more useful, which has above all the merit of having achieved

international notoriety.” (Tönnies 1926: 173) This concept is very clear from Breysig and Sinzheimer’s conferences. The latter wished to “use all of social sciences” (Sinzheimer 1909: 24) to carry out his sociological method in law. His conference was exceptional in the way it proposed methodological approaches. Conversely, conferences given at the SwSv show that academics by no means had a monopoly on the use of (social) science to explain contemporary problems.

- 32 SwSv guests, who sometimes enjoyed great academic prestige, usually only presented current problems and phenomena by claiming to be part of social science, without applying its principles. In this, the SwSv, in a manner similar to the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, showed that the question of the autonomy of social science was not simply one of political or economic power. More generally, the choice of objects and the confrontation with public issues – or those presented as such – were an integral part of this process (Bourdieu 1976; Sapiro 2019). Apart from the fact that it was difficult for them to avoid politics, the SwSv were also seen as a danger to academic order by a number of academics, university authorities, and politicians.

3. The Repression of Social Science Student Associations

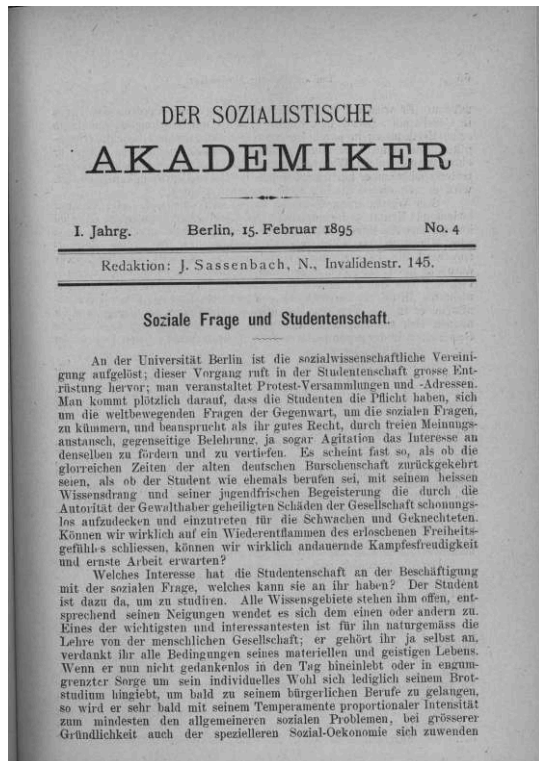
- 33 The *Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine* were created and promoted by students, professors, and other figures from a wide variety of scientific, ideological, and political backgrounds. But this diversity was not enough to prevent the conflation between social science and socialism, which formed the basis of the rejection on the part of the authorities.

3.1. The Autonomisation of Science and anti- Socialism

- 34 The period from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War was marked by a process of autonomisation of the academic field (Charle 1994; vom Bruch 1993). This ongoing and partial process began earlier in natural science than it did in the humanities and social science. Nevertheless, the debate on unbiased science within the Vfs, in which Max Weber was involved around 1910, attests to the search for an objective science independent of various forms of power (Feix 1978; Gläser 2014). This was even more essential for academics since certain figures of political power were afraid of social science and intervened directly, with the help of university authorities, against social science student associations.
- 35 The SwSv were founded after the non-extension in 1890 of the anti-socialist law, which had entered into force in 1878²¹. The end of official repression allowed for the unification of the various socialist parties and the creation of the SPD, which then enjoyed growing electoral success. This surge of socialism led to a new conservative turning point in government policy. The 1890s were also a decade of intense discussion among social democrats about the place and role of university students and graduates (*Akademiker*) within the party (Auernheimer 1985: 45-86). The rise of social democracy concerned the university authorities, and for the students, declaring themselves to be openly social democrat, or participating in an electoral committee of the Party could lead to their exclusion from the university. In 1895, *Der sozialistische Akademiker*, a journal about academic and student life, was published. It was replaced in 1897 by the

Sozialistische Monatshefte and its supplement *Der sozialistische student*²². These newspapers sometimes claimed to try to win the educated youth to socialism, but in reality the vast majority of social democrats regarded the student milieu as too conservative and nationalistic to be won over by their ideas²³. Political and university authorities carried out an investigation to find out who was behind these publications and how they were being circulated among students, but they scarcely got any results.

Fig. 2.



Catilina, "Soziale Frage und Studentenschaft" [The Social Question and the Student Community], *Der sozialistische Akademiker*, 1st year, No. 4, 15 February 1895: 65.

© *Der sozialistische Akademiker*

- 36 At the beginning of 1895, the Prussian minister of ecclesiastic and educational affairs expressed his concern in a circular at the publication of *Der sozialistische Akademiker*. The minister's representative at the University of Göttingen was concerned in his reply, without evidence, that the local SwSv was close to the newspaper, thus participating in the assimilation between social science and socialism²⁴. In Halle, although the SwSv was created by members of the *Burschenschaften*, the VDSt, and the Protestant Theology Association, among others, the authorities remained suspicious of socialist infiltration. The police dissolved an assembly on 16 May 1895, after surrounding the room in which the historian Eduard Meyer's rather unrevolutionary conference on the economic collapse of the Roman Empire was due to take place. No real justification was given. It was merely suggested that people of all classes would attend the the SwSv meetings, which would be a political association or even a gathering of social democrats. On 14 November, the association was finally dissolved by the rector and the university administration. It was then, with more than 200 members, the largest social science student association in Germany²⁵.

- 37 Among the proponents of the SwSv were students who were perfectly integrated into the imperial system (members of corporations), but also students who were discriminated against (especially Jews). Similarly, teachers who supported them occupied, for some, a dominant position (Brentano, Schmoller, Wagner), and, for others, a dominated position (Simmel, Tönnies) in the academic field. The commitment of these professors can be explained by the advantages they derived from the development of social science, and from its place in the university, that is to say, in the intellectual education of elites.
- 38 By contrast, opponents of the SwSv all occupied an established if not dominant position within their respective fields: professors, rectors, senior university officials, ministers, and influential deputies. They were united by a powerful political and social conservatism, a virulent stance against socialism, and often latent anti-Semitism. Their hostility to social science attests to their political conception of student duties, of good academic order, and of the functioning of society. Professors and politicians favoured corporations that were convinced by their ideas; they monitored and repressed independent and progressive organisations, such as the *Freistudentenschaft*, and tirelessly repeated that students should not engage in political parties or groups (Gerlach 1901). The assimilation of social science with socialism fuelled their attacks against the SwSv.

3.2. The Berlin Association Faces Political Hostility

- 39 The history of the SwSv in Berlin bears particular witness to this hostility. It was founded in the autumn of 1893 by fifteen students. Although it was authorised by the rector – a prerequisite for any student association – it was weakened by the prohibition of several conferences by the university authorities as early as December. Only two were allowed, one by a retired officer and the other by the regionalist-*Völkisch*-writer Wilhelm von Polenz (Schultze 1895a).
- 40 Members of Berlin's powerful *Verein Deutscher Studenten* viewed the new organisation critically since, though not connected with any political trend, its members, one-third of whom were Jewish, offered a different approach to the social question than that promoted by these anti-Semitic and nationalist students. They thus attempted to take control of the association, which led the members of the SwSv, on the advice of the university judge, Paul Daudé, to dissolve it in December 1894 and to form another. But rector Otto Pfeleiderer refused to authorise this new society, “because not only should the general opinion be taken into account, but also that of the *ruling circles*²⁶.” In emphasising these last words, the SwSv member (probably Schultze) who testified to these incidents was certainly referring to attacks by the industrialist and conservative deputy Carl-Ferdinand von Stumm-Halberg. Notably in a still-famous speech at the *Reichstag* he attacked “university socialists” (*Universitätssozialisten*), a term aimed at professors of political economy – who were usually referred to as “socialists of the chair” (*Kathedersozialisten*) – and the SwSv²⁷. The students' requests to the academic Senate and the minister of ecclesiastic and educational affairs failed. In their correspondence with the minister, Daudé and Pfeleiderer went out of their way to disparage the association and underline its risk to the good order of academic life. Their anti-Semitism was scarcely veiled. Daudé repeated many times that ten members are Jewish. While Jewish students were effectively excluded from many student

organisations, Daudé argued that this high number would indicate an attempt to close the SwSv to members of the openly anti-Semitic Association of German students (VDSt).

- 41 The rector function was renewed every year and Adolph Wagner succeeded Pfleiderer in October 1895. He authorised the reconstitution of the SwSv as of 29 October. This was not at all an obvious decision since Wagner was politically conservative and an honorary member of the Berlin VDSt. He thus gave precedence to science over politics. In a report to the minister who ordered him to explain this decision, Wagner said that the scientific ambition of the association is beyond doubt. The project was seen positively by other social science professors, with Schmoller even promoting it in a lesson. He himself considered such organisations promoting social science to be “something good and desirable²⁸,” because they complemented the teaching. Wagner said that he had participated in conferences and could see that the association fulfilled its ambitions in a serious and scientific way. He took the opportunity to add that, according to him, there were no social democrats in the SwSv. Finally, to justify his commitment, he recalled that he had publicly responded to von Stumm’s attacks.
- 42 In the years that followed, the SwSv’s life was punctuated by granting and prohibiting conferences. In the summer semester of 1900, Leo Arons’ lectures on “communal socialism” and Hellmut von Gerlach’s on the “link between international politics and fiscal policy” were banned. The former, a physicist, was known for having unwillingly and at his own expense given his name to a law in 1898. The biggest attack on academic autonomy of the era, the “lex Arons,” was voted to exclude him from the university after he joined the SPD, followed by all the *Privatdozenten* (university teachers without a chair) who did the same. To want to be an academic – that is, to aim for a chair and thus become a civil servant – while openly claiming to be a socialist remained impossible in Germany. The latter was editor-in-chief of the weekly *Die Welt am Montag*, and member of Friedrich Naumann’s liberal party, the *Nationalsozialer Verein* (National-Social Association). In both cases, the rector, mathematician Immanuel Fuchs, refused to justify these prohibitions. Moreover, successive rectors refused to allow women to give conferences before students²⁹, for example, the militant feminist Helene Lange, who was supposed to speak during the winter semester of 1896/97 on the “intellectual boundaries between man and woman.” Members of the SwSv filed unsuccessful appeals with the Academic Senate and the minister. Moreover, several cases attested to the persistent hostility of successive rectors towards the association. These did not involve the SwSv as such but its members, who engaged in student life by running for election to the university’s only self-regulating student body, the academic reading cabinet.
- 43 In January 1902, the SwSv was again banned by the rector, the archaeologist Reinhard Kekulé von Stradonitz, as a result of an alleged violation of his orders concerning the participation of women at conferences. Kekulé and Daudé went as far as to state, on the poster announcing the dissolution of the association, that “its existence threatened the academic discipline³⁰.” In addition to their misogyny and hostility to the very existence of the SwSv, their anti-Semitic sentiments probably played a part: of its thirty-four members (nine non-Germans), 22 were Jewish, five of whom were foreigners. They regarded it as being dominated by Jews, who were always more suspected than Christians of not being truly faithful to the emperor and the Empire and of having ties to social democracy. The new ban led conservatives to renew their attacks on the association: “It is known that in the now dissolved Social Science Student Association,

the most radical currents have been able to develop, and this has thus opened the way to social democracy³¹.” Again, an appeal to the minister was filed; A. Wagner wrote in defence of the association³²; former members organised a grand assembly to protest against the dissolution: to no avail, and no new association was subsequently formed.

- 44 The history of Berlin’s SwSv illustrates the limited democratisation of German universities, at least Prussian ones. A student association that had many Jewish members and which aimed to reflect on the social question was suspected by the authorities of being subversive or of spreading socialist ideas, even though its members had never collectively spoken out in favour of any political or ideological movement. It was in fact the participation of students in public life which was feared and attacked. Students were not believed to be mature enough for such engagement; they ought to be content – in the purest conception of *Bildung* – with regarding life in their country from an individual perspective and from an intellectual and scientific distance, which did not permit study of the social question.

Conclusion

- 45 Recent research has shown the value of a history of sociology which integrates academic and non-academic publications (Mosbah-Natanson 2017; Neef 2012). This perspective can be extended to the uses of social science as a whole. Social science student associations are evidence of this, demonstrating the appeal for a significant portion of the intellectual elite in training of the social question and social science in the 1890s and 1900s. However, these associations were to last only a short time in many universities because of the hostility of the authorities.
- 46 The term “social science,” which is present in the name of the SwSv, referred to disciplines that were still being formed (sociology), disciplines that were expanding (political economy), and those that were well established in the academic world, and whose adherents rarely felt close to the new disciplines (such as history). The still-developing social sciences served to give the allure of science to the social question, which was widely understood as encompassing all contemporary problems. As a result, students were less interested in social science subjects as academic disciplines for their intellectual education than as an introduction to the issues of the time, with a view to becoming the future elite. Therefore, we can propose renewed analysis of both its institutionalisation in the university system and of its promotion and teaching outside the framework of a university course. As Wolf Lepenies has shown (1990), social science had to become independent from literature and natural science. But it also had to, and perhaps more importantly, become independent from both the expertise that some of its promoters attributed to it, and from the political function its opponents accused it of. It is only in the quest for this twofold autonomy that Max Weber’s defence of “science without prejudice” (“axiological neutrality”) can be understood (Kalinowski 2005). In the absence of a clear definition of social science, in the absence of a shared acceptance of disciplinary specialisation – these two characteristics are expressed in particular by the lack of autonomisation of sociology from political economy – and owing to a certain political hostility (which was far greater than the idealistic hostility of poets highlighted by Lepenies), autonomisation was impossible to achieve collectively beyond the personal work of a few scholars.

- 47 The experience of German social science student associations thus highlights the challenges and obstacles to the autonomisation of social science at the turn of the century. Three main difficulties can be highlighted, which remain at stake today. The first is the constitution of its own purpose, which in Wilhelmine Germany remained associated with and reduced to the social question in its various forms, which led to a conflict between a science that only produces knowledge and a science that serves practice and is directly useful for political or economic action. The second is the formation of disciplines that are defined and recognised as such, which has remained embryonic for a long time. And the third is independence from political authorities, which is far from being achieved since social science remains a cause of fear and hostility. While these problems are known in the history of social science, the case of the *Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine* reveals the interconnectedness of the scientific and social logics of the academic field, the formation of an autonomous science, and the redefinition of the creation and training of future elites and their social role.
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NOTES

1. Women were gradually given the right to enrol officially as students in the States of the German Empire from 1900 onwards. While a few were able to gain access to certain "prestigious occupations" (for the French case, see Rennes 2007), they remained excluded from the model of the intellectual elite – it is not possible to address this issue within the framework of this article. The word "student" in this article will therefore refer to male students, and the presence of female students will be specified where appropriate.

2. A lexicon in French of German student organisations can be found at: Studentenschaft.
3. It should be noted that the article by vom Bruch is apologetic and minimises the anti-Semitism of the VDSt.
4. All translations are ours.
5. The author does not give the titles of the other four chairs. Disciplines or titles of recognised chairs (1868-1953): Sociology, social science and social policy, political economy, science and labour protection, political science, communication science (*Publizistik*).
6. This article is originally published in the short-lived journal of educational and cultural issues *Das neue Leben*.
7. A Parisian student thus proposed a “conference on the division of social work after Mr. Durkheim” to his fellow students – a report of which was given in *L'Université de Paris. Bulletin de l'Association Générale des Étudiants de Paris* (bulletin of the General Association of Students of Paris), 8(58), December 1893: 135.
8. Prospectus dated 13 November 1894, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (hereafter GStA PK), I. HA Ref. 76, V^{to} Sekt. 8 all XII Nr. 10 BD. 1.
9. Universitätsarchiv Heidelberg, RA 4826.
10. The same was true of all scientific student associations of law, medicine, history, and literature at the time, with the difference that, unlike social science, these were institutionalised disciplines within the university.
11. “Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereinigungen,” *Die Grenzboten*, 53(IV), 1894: 583-584.
12. I would like to thank Tommy Stöckel for reminding me of this passage of Bouglé’s account, and for his comments on a first draft of this text.
13. Max Hirsch, Liberal deputy and co-founder of the moderate Hirsch-Duncker trade unions and three members of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), deputies Max Schippel and Johannes Timm, and the theorist Eduard Bernstein.
14. Jastrow, Naumann, and Bonn were members of the VfS.
15. *Kölnische Zeitung*, 18 May 1896.
16. From the 1890s, at most higher education institutions, students who were not members of a corporation founded an association called the “Community of Free Students” to defend their interests and promote forms of sociability among themselves. This was open to male and female students, without distinction as to religion or nationality (Wipf 2004).
17. UAF, B1/2720.
18. Zentralstelle der Akademischen Arbeiter-Untertskurse Deutschlands, *Bericht über die VII. Konferenz am 16. Und 17. April 1910*, s. l. n. d.: 4.
19. “Die Akademischen Arbeiterunterrichtskurse,” in Präsidium der Berliner Freien Studentenschaft (ed.), *Zur Einführung in das Akademische Leben an der Universität Berlin*, Berlin, Verlag Hans Krieger, 1913: 29-31.
20. Jastrow’s lecture does not appear to have been published.
21. The conservative shift in Otto von Bismarck’s politics began in 1878. He ended his alliance with the liberals and focused on repressing the socialist movement, which he regarded as the major threat to the Empire. This law made it possible to ban parties, organisations, gatherings, and publications solely on the basis of socialism.
22. *The Socialist Academic*, *The Socialist Monthly*, and *The Socialist Student* respectively.
23. *Vorwärts*, 6 December 1894.
24. Report of Dr. Höppner, 29 March, 1895, GStA PK, I. HA Ref. 76 V^a Sekt. 1 Tit. XII Nr. 27 Bd. 3.
25. *National-Zeitung*, 17 May and 15 November 1895.
26. “Der Richter und der Rektor,” *Volkszeitung*, 12 December 1894, highlighted in the text.
27. Comments made on 9 January 1895 (9th parliament, 10th sitting), Reichstagsprotokolle 1894/95-1: 206-213.

28. Letter from A. Wagner at the *Kultusminister*, s. d. (received 25 November 1895). GSTA PK, I. HA Ref. 76 Sekt. 2 Tit. XII Nr. 17 Bd. 1.

29. With one exception in 1899, because Wagner and Schmoller pleaded with the rector for authorisation. Women could then only be lecture attendees if the teacher accepted them into their lessons. The Grand Duchy of Baden allowed them to register as students in 1900, a step imitated by other German states in the following years, including Prussia in 1908. Only male students therefore belonged to the Berlin SwSv.

30. Cited in "Aufhebung des Sozialwissenschaftlichen Studentenvereins," *Die Post*, 8 January 1902.

31. *Kreuz-Zeitung*, 8 January 1902, highlighted in the text. *Kreuz-Zeitung* was the journal of the Prussian conservatives.

32. Adolf WAGNER, "Der sozialwissenschaftliche Verein," *Kreuz-Zeitung*, 15 January 1902. This open letter, a response to the above-mentioned article, was very different from the report issued privately to the minister in 1895. Wagner was more openly critical of the university administration and called to stop treating students like children.

ABSTRACTS

This article considers the conflicts linking the social question to the social sciences in Germany around 1900 through the analysis of the student associations for social sciences (*Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine*). Students did not seek an introduction to social sciences as academic scientific disciplines in particular, which remained loosely autonomous and suffered from heterogeneous definitions and uses. Much more, students looked for a scientific legitimacy for the resolution of the social question, a task that had to be tackled by the elite they felt destined to join. For a large part of university and political authorities, this interest for the social question could only mean socialism. Therefore, they repressed these associations, especially in Prussia, despite their certain attractiveness. The history of these associations allows to understand the attempts to redefine the social role of elites as well as the institutionalisation of the social sciences, which turn out to be closely linked.

Cet article revient sur les conflits qui lient question sociale et sciences sociales en Allemagne autour de 1900, en mettant au cœur de l'analyse les associations étudiantes de sciences sociales (*Sozialwissenschaftliche Studentenvereine*). Ce ne sont pas tant les sciences sociales en tant que disciplines universitaires, faiblement autonomisées et aux définitions et usages encore hétérogènes, qui sont recherchées par les étudiants, qu'un cadre et une légitimité scientifiques au règlement de la question sociale, tâche à laquelle doit s'atteler l'élite qu'ils s'estiment destinés à rejoindre. Pour une large partie des autorités universitaires et politiques, cet investissement de la question sociale ne peut qu'être synonyme de socialisme et elles se sont attachées, surtout en Prusse, à réprimer ces associations, malgré leur certaine attractivité. Ces associations rendent en cela visibles les tentatives de redéfinition du rôle social des élites et l'institutionnalisation universitaire des sciences sociales, qui s'avèrent être étroitement liées.

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