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EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS

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EDWARD ALSWORTH ROSS (Dec. 12, 1866 - July 22, 1951), sociologist and writer, was born in Virden, Illinois, the son of William Carpenter Ross, a farmer, and Rachel Alsworth, a school teacher. Orphaned by his mother’s and father’s deaths (1874 and 1876, respectively), Ross was sheltered in turn by three Iowa farm families. Of the latter, Ross regarded Mary Beach as his foster mother. Alexander Campbell, Ross’ lawyer guardian, shepherded his inheritance, thereby providing ample funds for his schooling.

Completing the A.B. degree at Coe College (1886), Ross studied a year at the University of Berlin and travelled in France and England (1888-89). He entered graduate work majoring in economics at Johns Hopkins (1890) where his mentors included Richard T. Ely and Woodrow Wilson. With minors in philosophy and ethics, Ross earned the Ph.D. degree (1891). His doctoral thesis on the public debt, Sinking Funds, was published by the American Economic Association (1892).

He married Rosamond Simons (1892). She was the niece of sociologist Lester Frank Ward, and Ross looked to Ward as a mentor, observing, “to receive the outpourings of his encyclopedic mind was equivalent to a post-doctoral course.” Rosamond Ross was an artist and homemaker who devoted herself to her husband and their three sons.

Ross rose rapidly in academia, accepting a succession of attractive university posts: Indiana (1891-92), Cornell (1892-93), Stanford (1893-1900). He was elected secretary of the American Economic Association (1892). He was a demanding instructor who assigned to his students challenging readings such as Herbert Spencer’s Principles of Sociology and Lester Frank Ward’s Dynamic Sociology. Beyond the classroom, Ross enjoyed giving robust public lectures and Chautauqua-style extension courses for adults. He wrote for popular magazines such as Atlantic Monthly and Century, as well as for scholarly journals, and became known for his punchy, attention-grabbing literary style, the cream of which enlivens his Capsules of Social Wisdom (1948). His penchant for spirited free speaking erupted in a fin de siecle cataclysm at Stanford University.

During Ross’ Stanford years (1893-1900), his increasingly progressive views, free silver advocacy, and general outspokenness collided with Jane Lathrop Stanford, the university’s conservative benefactress and powerful guiding hand. David Starr Jordan, the Stanford president, failed to mollify Jane Stanford or finesse Ross. Jordan vacillated but capitulated to Jane Stanford’s demand for Ross’ termination, and curtly dismissed him at year’s end (1900). George Elliott Howard, a respected Stanford professor, was then brutally forced by Jordan to resign for having lectured Stanford students on the unfairness of firing Ross. Nearly a dozen Stanford faculty resignations ensued to protest the Ross-Howard dismissals, igniting national debate about freedom of expression versus the control of universities by business interests. Ross was exonerated by an investigating committee of the American Economic Association (1901). From this incident, grew the organized campaign to secure tenured protection for American academics.

The collapse of sociology at Stanford was exploited by the University of Nebraska whose populist faction immediately obtained Ross’ services as Professor of Sociology (1901), and later created a professorship for George Elliott Howard (1904). The collegial efforts of Ross, Howard, and a young law professor, Roscoe Pound, briefly made Nebraska a sociological powerhouse. Directly influenced by Ross, Pound devised and promulgated “sociological jurisprudence,” a perspective that dominated American legal thinking during much of the twentieth century.

Ross accomplished his most important intellectual work while at Nebraska. He published a revised series of articles as Social Control (1901), in which he identified the collective factors that promote societal stability, and he wrote a comprehensive, systematic theory of society, Foundations of Sociology (1905). Before leaving Nebraska, he finished the manuscript for Social Psychology (1908), in which he extended the ideas of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. And, meeting informally around his desk, Ross, Howard, and Pound established the topic outline for what became Ross’ Principles of Sociology (1920).

Ross accepted an attractive offer from the University of Wisconsin to join its Economics Department under the reins of his former teacher, Richard T. Ely (1906). He was appointed Professor of Sociology and, as the only sociologist, developed course offerings along his own lines. Selected to guide a separately formed Department of Sociology and Anthropology in 1929, Ross chaired the Wisconsin department from 1929 to 1937; and was further honored with election to Professor Emeritus in 1937.

The progressive political element in Wisconsin suited Ross well, stimulating his pen and public appearances. His popular essay on the evils of irresponsible financial greed, Sin and Society (1907), garnered public endorsement from President Theodore Roosevelt who noted, “With almost all that you write I am in full and hearty sympathy.” Ross thus proudly joined a cadre of popular reform-oriented authors, including William Allen White and Upton Sinclair.
Ross was twice elected to the presidency of the American Sociological Society (1914, 1915). As president, he sponsored ASS sessions on freedom of expression and appointed his friend Roscoe Pound, then of the Harvard Law School, to represent the ASS on an interdisciplinary committee that became the mechanism for founding the American Association of University Professors. Believing that sociology should be an active and socially responsible discipline, Ross later counselled his fellow ASS members, “There may come a time in the career of every sociologist when it is his solemn duty to raise hell.”

Ross was adventuresome, a well-seasoned traveller and a world student. He re-visited Europe, during his first sabbatical opportunity, for independent studies at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the British Museum in London (1898-99). Subsequent, extended globe-trotting included: China and Japan (1910), western South America (1913-14), Russia (1917), Mexico (1922), Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa (1924), India (1924-25), Europe and the USSR (1934), a round-the-world cruise as Education Director of The Floating University (1928-29), and a medically advised rest in Tahiti (1932). His travels unearthed empirical fodder for numerous articles and travel books whose royalties, in turn, funded further treks. Popular works in this genre included: The Changing Chinese (1911), South of Panama (1915), Russia in Upheaval (1918), The Russian Bolshevik Revolution (1921), The Social Revolution in Mexico (1923), and The Russian Soviet Republic (1923).

His Tahitian idylls ended with the unexpected news of his wife’s death in the United States (1932). A reflective Ross wrote his autobiography (1936), eschewing earlier views about racial superiority with which he had become associated. He also revealed his gradual and complete disillusionment with religion. He married Helen Forbes, a well-known social worker (1940). As capstone to his long crusade for freedom of expression, Ross served as national chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union (1940-50). He died at home in Madison, Wisconsin.

Ross was a tireless, enthusiastic advocate for professional sociology and his work materially shaped the founding contours of that discipline at the turn of the century. His legacy today is the near universal recognition of the right to freedom of expression by academics world wide.

Bibliography
