RIDING NATURAL SCIENTISTS’ COATTAILS ONTO THE ENDLESS FRONTIER: 
THE SSRC AND THE QUEST FOR SCIENTIFIC LEGITIMACY

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This article proposes that the postwar National Science Foundation (NSF) debate constituted a critical, transitional episode in American social science and partisan politics. I show that by responding to powerful conservative critics in the scientific and political communities, the Social Science Research Council’s (SSRC’s) leading scholars (re)asserted a contested scientistic strategy—to advance the social sciences by following the natural sciences. Further, I reconstruct a wider and longer framework of analysis in order to recover central challenges to the scientistic strategy raised by prominent liberal scholars who rejected the associated commitments to value neutrality and disinterested professionalism. In developing this framework for understanding the contrasting fortunes of each strategy, this article argues that the NSF debate has a deep historical significance—for the social sciences, for American liberalism, and for the nation. ©2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

In his landmark 1945 policy report on American science, Science—The Endless Frontier (SEF), Vannevar Bush urged the federal government to create a new agency for the natural sciences as the centerpiece of the nation’s postwar scientific enterprise. In passing, Bush added that “it would be folly” to ignore “the social sciences, humanities, and other studies so essential to national well-being,” though he had not included them in his proposed agency (Bush, 1945/1990a, p. 23). In 1950, after years of national debate, President Truman signed the enabling act creating the National Science Foundation (NSF). This act did not specifically mention the social sciences, but a clause referring to the “other sciences” indicated that the new agency could support them.

Much of the historical literature on this episode places the “other sciences” on the sidelines as well. A long line of works recognize Bush’s report, the national science policy debate, the attendant partisan conflict, and the NSF’s legislative origins as constituting a critical episode in the postwar reconstruction of American science. Focusing mainly on federal policy for the natural sciences, major studies typically mention the social sciences at most in passing. This literature also suggests, however, that the question about whether the social sciences should be included was related to more central issues, like the organization and control of the new agency (England, 1982, pp. 6, 33–34, 49–50, 52–56; Kelles, 1977a; Kevles, 1977b, pp. 344–346, 356–357; D. L. Kleinman, 1995, p. 101; Wang, 1999, pp. 28, 31, 257). Turning to the writings by historians of the social sciences, we find that the problematic status of social science in the postwar national science debate is regularly mentioned but, again, not given much attention. Important recent studies leave the impression that the postwar science debate was frustrating for social scientists but also of relatively minor importance in an era when American social science came to enjoy significant support from other patrons and underwent substantial expansion as part of the wider postwar boom in American science and higher education (Bernstein, 2001, pp. 100–101; Capshew, 1999, pp. 176–179; Herman, 1995, p. 46; Robin, 2001, p. 44).
Yet for the “other sciences” themselves, the postwar national science policy debate has continued to attract extensive interest, especially among sociologists (Buxton, 1985, pp. 117–121; Larsen, 1992, pp. 1–18; Lyons, 1969, pp. 126–136; Miller, 1982). Of special interest is Thomas Gieryn’s essay that examines the early postwar debate in terms of cultural boundary work, wherein social scientists, together with their supporters and critics, employed various rhetorical strategies to situate the social sciences inside or outside their chosen definition of “science.” Gieryn, however, explicitly did not intend to offer a historical account of the postwar debate or an assessment of its larger historical importance (Gieryn, 1999). In a more historically oriented work, Samuel Klausner and Victor Lidz have suggested that this episode should be seen as part of a momentous development referred to as the “nationalization of the social sciences.” Their edited volume explores this development by focusing on a lengthy and previously unpublished essay written by the famous Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons, commissioned by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and designed to strengthen the precarious public image of the social sciences during the postwar debate (Klausner & Lidz, 1986). As the continuing interest of practicing social scientists suggests, the postwar debate is important because it speaks to basic problems for their field in the areas of scientific status, political support, patronage, and public relations. Clearly, being regarded as the “other sciences” hurt then and still irritates now. But to appreciate fully the larger historical significance of this episode, I propose that we need to adopt a wider and longer historical perspective.

In this essay, I argue, first, that the postwar debate stands out as a critical transitional moment in the history of American social science. As the preceding interwar era came to a close, the future of American social science had seemed very uncertain. The postwar national science debate showed that fundamental questions about the scientific status and political support for the social sciences continued to be quite troublesome. But these questions now appeared in a new and, in some respects, radically different context transformed by dramatic wartime and postwar developments in American politics and American science. In order to establish this relationship between the prewar and postwar contexts, I weave together material on Bush’s report and stance on the “other sciences,” legislative developments, partisan conflict, and the efforts by American social scientists to win public support, convince skeptics of their scientific status, and improve their tarnished public image. I situate the immediate events and controversies in the context of long-standing debate about the proper scope and social purpose of American social science and especially the argument over whether the “hard” sciences provided an appropriate model for the “soft” sciences. Following this debate requires consideration of the troubled history of extra-university patronage for academic social research, imperfect relationships between the natural and social sciences, and contested connections between the social sciences and national politics, especially conservative concerns about the role of social scientists in promoting New Deal liberalism. This complex story is necessary in order to understand just how important the postwar science debate was in bringing together basic questions about the intellectual, financial, institutional, and political dimensions of American social science at a critical historical juncture.

Second, I offer a new understanding of what the political, intellectual, and professional stakes were as the Social Science Research Council’s scholars set out to win a place for social science in the proposed postwar science agency. I argue that by crafting a public relations strategy that defined the social sciences as part of a unified scientific enterprise, SSRC scholars like Wesley Mitchell, Robert Yerkes, and Talcott Parsons were pushing aside central challenges to that strategy. In particular, prominent scholars on the liberal left, including Americans John Dewey, Robert Lynd, Charles Beard, and Louis Wirth, as well as Europeans
like Karl Mannheim and Gunnar Myrdal, had all attacked “scientism,” the emphasis on developing the social sciences along the lines of the natural sciences, especially if this meant that social scientists should embrace a value-neutral, apolitical, and disinterested professional identity. In tracing the fortunes of these competing visions, we will see how the postwar science debate gave a central boost to the scientistic impulse and simultaneously helped to marginalize the trenchant critique of scientism that had emerged on the (noncommunist) political left. This episode thus becomes an important chapter in the wider history of American social science, American partisan politics, and American liberalism.

AN OMINOUS BEGINNING

The first part of our story begins with the social sciences offstage. This point is crucial, because in the events that would transpire, we find American social scientists often scrambling to respond to transformations in American science, politics, and science policy mainly controlled by other more powerful actors in the political and scientific communities.

Bush’s 1945 report played a key role in an emerging struggle between two camps and their competing visions for the future of American science. With strong connections to organized labor and the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party, West Virginia Senator Harley M. Kilgore led one side. Having obtained his own Senate subcommittee in 1942, Kilgore put forth various legislative proposals and policy principles that became associated with a liberal postwar science policy agenda. In Kilgore’s view, the national welfare would be best served if federal science policy developed a coherent set of national research priorities; if the results of publicly funded research were made widely available to the public; if federal patronage supported research in universities from a wide range of geographical locations; and if the proposed agency were politically responsive to a variety of interest groups, by having representatives from small business, labor, and the public on its governing board and by having the President appoint its director (D. L. Kleinman, 1995, pp. 74–92; Maddox, 1979, 1981).

Before long, there arose a conservative countereffort led by Vannevar Bush, an electrical engineer by training, a former dean of engineering and vice-president at MIT, and, at the time, the director of the central wartime science agency, the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD). Bush abhorred the centralizing tendencies of the New Deal and the expansion of federal power into areas of American life previously handled by the private sector, philanthropy, and local government (Reingold, 1991). In *SEF*, he called for the creation of an “over-all” science agency based upon principles that became associated with a conservative postwar policy agenda (Bush, 1945/1990a, p. 9). In contrast to Kilgore’s proposal, Bush proposed that to preserve “freedom of inquiry,” the government had to allow institutions that carry out research to maintain “internal control of policy, personnel, and . . . research”; that patents deriving from agency-sponsored research should not become governmental property; that the agency should not be required to follow any rule concerning the geographical distribution of public funds; that science should be kept separate from politics by having a board of private citizens including, presumably, many scientists who would handle the administration of the agency’s funds; and that the agency’s director should be chosen not by the President but by its board of scientifically minded private citizens (Bush, 1945/1990a, pp. 12, 33; Zachary, 1999).

Above all, Bush emphasized the need to keep science free from political control.

Shortly thereafter, Congress unveiled competing proposals for a new science agency. Following Bush’s conservative plans to a tee, Washington State’s Warren Magnuson, a New Deal liberal Democrat and friend of President Truman (similar to Kilgore), but who was also on good social terms with Bush, introduced a Senate bill (Scates, 1997). From Arkansas,
Wilbur Mills, another liberal Democrat, but more moderate, introduced a companion House bill (Zelizer, 1998). Furious, Kilgore reasserted himself by introducing another Senate bill based on his preferred policy principles (U.S. Congress, 1945a).

Up until this time, the social sciences were notable in their absence. Kilgore’s bill only mentioned the natural sciences and “related economic and industrial studies,” probably reflecting an overriding concern with the natural sciences rather than an impulse to exclude the social sciences specifically (U.S. Congress, 1945a). In SEF and associated legislative proposals, the social sciences received no consideration, though Bush had noted in passing that they should not be overlooked. In a letter to Truman, Bush explained that he had not included them in the proposed agency because Roosevelt’s 1944 request “had in mind the natural sciences, including biology and medicine” (Bush, 1945/1990b). But as one of the leading science administrators in the country, Bush also had good reason to believe that any discussion of the social sciences would certainly be troublesome.

First, as Bush surely knew, an important segment of the nation’s natural science elite had never recognized the social sciences as members, never mind equal partners, in science. Consider the case of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), established during the Civil War to provide advice on scientific matters to the federal government. NAS carried out studies requested by federal agencies and brought together leaders from government, industry, and academia to assess the state of scientific inquiry in fields deemed relevant to major national interests. At the Academy, it had “not been easy to set the boundaries for anthropology and psychology within the framework of the parent body, representing as it does by tradition the natural sciences” (McLean, 1954, p. 1). Even NAS’s work in anthropology and psychology—the only two social disciplines with a recognizable presence in the Academy until the 1960s—was largely limited to their physical or biological aspects (Cochrane, 1978).

National science policy events during the Great Depression had contributed another thick layer of friction between social and natural scientists. During that economic crisis, eminent social scientists, including University of Columbia economist Wesley C. Mitchell and University of Chicago political scientist Charles E. Merriam, held positions on a controversial national agency in which no natural scientists were included. First established in 1933 within the Public Works Administration, this New Deal planning agency underwent a number of organizational and name changes, becoming a presidential board and then part of the Executive Office of the President in 1939, at which point it was called the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB; Merriam, 1944). In the mid-1930s, the NRPB reviewed plans for a major federal science program proposed by a separate natural science-oriented agency called the Science Advisory Board (SAB), which had close ties to NAS and had also been created in 1933, merely two weeks after the NRPB. Not surprisingly, the two agencies clashed. The NRPB rejected the plan put forth by SAB, and SAB’s death soon followed (Auerbach, 1965). Adding insult to injury, the NRPB, with the President’s approval, then created its own advisory science committee, which proceeded to produce a landmark three-volume report on the nation’s scientific resources (National Resources Committee, 1938–1941). The memory of these events could not have endeared social scientists to natural scientists, especially those with connections to the short-lived SAB or NAS. As an engineer, Bush was ineligible for NAS membership but still had close colleagues and friends at the Academy.

Second, with the advent of World War II, the balance of political influence had dramatically shifted in favor of natural scientists, especially physical scientists who dominated top-level positions at Bush’s OSRD and also starred in major wartime projects that produced radar, the proximity fuse, computers, and atom bombs. Though social scientists contributed to the war in a variety of areas, and psychologist John G. Darley would suggest that “World
War II can also be said to have been a social scientist’s war;” they were overshadowed by the wartime wizardry of scholars from the “hard sciences” (Darley, 1951, p. 11). Moreover, social scientists had no central wartime agency comparable to the OSRD, whose leaders only saw fit to create a panel for applied psychology; otherwise, the social sciences were excluded from this key node of wartime science (Bray, 1948; Parsons, 1946a, pp. 658–659).

Third, because of their extensive involvement with the New Deal, Roosevelt’s liberal academic advisors, including many social scientists, had come under repeated, often brutal conservative criticism. By returning to the NRPB, we have an illustrative example. Over a ten-year period, the social science–led NRPB had developed an extensive philosophy of federal social insurance and called for cradle-to-grave welfare programs, what Charles Merriam and others called “A New Bill of Rights,” including the “right” to decent work and fair pay; to adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, and security; to a system of free enterprise; to come and go freely; to equality before the law; and to rest, recreation, and adventure (National Resources Planning Board, 1942a). In the late 1930s, the Board had also supported a major administrative reorganization designed to strengthen the executive branch of the federal government—then under Democratic control. During the early 1940s, a coalition of outraged conservatives in Congress voted against any further public appropriations for the NRPB. Consequently, in 1943, the social science–led Board expired, its death the result of political blows inflicted by conservatives hostile to New Deal planning and its social science supporters (Clawson, 1981; Merriam, 1944, pp. 1084–1085).

But what about Bush’s own views? Some historical accounts suggest that in constructing postwar science policy plans, Bush acted as well on personal fears, believing that social science was “so much political propaganda masquerading as science” (Kevles, 1995, p. xiii). But he suggested to Congress that the “proposed foundation should allow an opportunity for effective integration and partnership between the natural and social sciences,” adding that this “should be the result of careful study by the foundation after its establishment” (Reingold, 1991, pp. 309, 313–314; U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 200). Still, this position, by framing the public support for the social sciences as a much less pressing national concern, would also be attractive to their critics who could agree with Bush on other issues.

Nevertheless, the social disciplines soon came into the picture “with a bang” (Stewart, 1945). That characterization came from Irvin Stewart, Bush’s executive secretary in the OSRD, and referred to the President’s September message to Congress in which Truman outlined a re-conversion program (from wartime to peacetime activities), urged speedy passage of Kilgore’s science legislation, and called for the support of both the natural and social sciences. Most importantly, by declaring his administration’s interest in continuing a wide array of New Deal policies, Truman helped to cement the connection between the social sciences and liberal postwar science policy plans, a connection bound to spark public disagreement (Truman, 1946).

Meanwhile, social scientists were discussing these fast-moving developments among themselves. Of special importance were the deliberations of the Social Science Research Council. Since the SSRC’s founding in the 1920s, the Council had occupied a unique place in American scholarship. With funds mainly from private foundations and especially the Rockefeller philanthropies, the Council provided social scientists with extensive support to develop research personnel, organization, materials, and methods; to disseminate research results; and to promote the public appreciation of social science. By the mid-1930s, the Council had established itself as the “central national body” for American social science (Wirth, 1937b, p. 133). The Council’s basic composition and structure included a chief executive (or president); members representing the major national professional societies of psychologists,
sociologists, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, geographers, statisticians, and historians; additional members at large; a central Problems and Policy Committee; and a group of standing committees that dealt with specific topics of Council interest (Fisher, 1993; Karl, 1974; Sibley, 1974). By 1944, the Council recognized that “no other single activity” had “immediately equal significance” as the future relationship between the federal government and social science research (SSRC, 1944–1945, p. 7).  

Initially, the SSRC’s Committee on the Federal Government and Research, chaired by Wesley Mitchell, became worried about the prospect of extensive postwar public patronage, a concern that emerged against formative events in the Council’s own history. In the 1910s, critics of big business had warned that such funding came with the imprint of corporate capitalism—the source of philanthropic largesse—and would thus compromise the intellectual integrity of scholarly inquiry. In response, in the following decades, the Rockefeller and Carnegie philanthropies, together with leading social scientists at the SSRC and elsewhere, elaborated a rhetoric of nonpartisanship and value neutrality as scientific ideals (Fisher, 1993; Lagemann, 1989, pp. 51–70). But during the troubled 1930s, foundation support became “precarious and temporary” and directed increasingly at research that addressed pressing practical problems. This combination of factors, warned an internal SSRC review, was threatening to diminish the SSRC’s “independent judgment,” dampen its “initiative,” and accentuate “a policy of drift and opportunism” (Wirth, 1937b, p. 151).

In the early twentieth century, the threat posed by federal patronage had remained small, but considering the dramatic wartime changes in American science, that threat would obviously loom much larger in the future (Anderson, 1988; Kirkendall, 1966; Lyons, 1969). During that global conflict, annual federal support for scientific research increased from about $48 million to $500 million, from about 18 percent to 83 percent of total national research support (Hoch, 1988, p. 96). As Mitchell’s Committee noted, the “pre-war balance between governmental and private research” would probably not be restored (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1944, p. 2).

Above all, the Committee feared that a dramatically enlarged role for the federal government would result in significant damage. In April 1944, the Committee warned that in certain fields of social inquiry “intellectual hegemony” might come to “rest with the respective research staffs of the Federal bureaus.” The wartime situation could foster a “devaluation” of the “standards of work” and even “the concept of research itself.” The long-term result could be “an entire generation of research workers” suffering from a “permanent impairment of skill, objectivity, and interest” (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1944, p. 2). One year later, such fears had intensified, with Mitchell’s Committee reporting that “the stand against general subsidization of research . . . represented the consensus of the committee” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1945a, p. 1).

Yet the Council’s scholars did not want to act too hastily, risk alienating other scientists, and end up, albeit unwittingly, shutting the social sciences off in a lonely, impoverished corner. The SSRC’s Committee on Problems and Policy underscored “the universal desire for more funds.” Consequently, it seemed that “a negative statement” regarding federal research support might “not be popular with the Council’s constituents.” With the completion and public presentation of Bush’s report expected soon, such a statement could “be construed as

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1. The Council’s Committee on the Federal Government and Research included three members whose views I will consider later: the economist Edwin G. Nourse, the sociologist William F. Ogburn, and the psychologist Robert M. Yerkes.
prejudicial to the interests” of natural scientists as well, which “would be unfortunate” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1945b, pp. 3, 5).

Once Congress unveiled competing legislative proposals in July, concern about the political subordination of scholarly work began to recede further, as the Council’s social science leaders came to emphasize the dire implications of being left out of the proposed centerpiece of post-war American science policy. The SSRC’s Problem and Policy Committee observed that “even the original consensus against government subsidization of private institutions for research seems no longer to prevail.” Believing that previous sentiment had been “too hesitant and fearful,” “one opinion” now favored an “aggressive policy” in favor of federal support. In addition, it seemed possible to obtain support without the “disadvantages from centralized control” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1945c, p. 2).

The shift in opinion hardened following Truman’s re-conversion address, with a new consensus emerging on the point that federal funding, “a question of the gravest importance for the Council,” was needed to stimulate the social sciences “at the maximum feasible rate” (SSRC Board of Directors, 1945, pp. 7, 8). Why? The reasons were many. According to Chicago demographer Philip M. Hauser, a new agency created only for the physical sciences would probably drain personnel away from the social sciences (SSRC Board of Directors, 1945, p. 10). More generally, it seemed that the federal government was “the only source now in sight” capable of supplying the desirable level of “augmented funds” for the social sciences (SSRC Board of Directors, 1945, p. 8). Brief consideration of other sources of support would have suggested obvious limitations. Hit hard by the Great Depression, private foundations could no longer shoulder so much of the burden for supporting American social science. As for industry, one could expect support of work related to commercial interests but not much else. Similarly, one could expect the military to support studies related to its operational goals, but beyond that, as of 1945, the size and scope of postwar military science programs remained highly uncertain.

Another possible source of funds lay in the creation of a separate national agency for social science. According to Harvard’s Talcott Parsons, soon after the publication of Bush’s report “a considerable body of opinion” favored a separate agency. However, scholars had quickly concluded that Congress was not likely to favor a separate social science agency, in part because the social sciences were “politically controversial” (Parsons, 1946a, p. 660). Thus, unless social scientists would be happy being left out in the cold, they would need to win a spot in the legislative plans already on the table.

It seems fair to conclude that at the Council, practical considerations had turned the quest for public patronage and inclusion in the proposed science agency into a pressing issue, overshadowing concerns about the impact of public funds on scholarly “standards of work.” Mitchell’s Committee continued to emphasize the need to maintain “the freedom of inquiry and the independence of the spirit of research” (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1945, p. 8), but the Committee had also concluded that safeguards, like the existence of diverse sources of support and diverse institutions, could prevent federal control of research. Some of the Council’s scholars also felt they had few good options. As one SSRC member put it, the Council almost seemed “forced” to approve of social science participation or else lose any influence it might have (SSRC Board of Directors, 1945, p. 17).

As the science policy debate unfolded, social scientists’ quest for national support would confront substantial obstacles. Long-standing problems concerning the scholarly foundations and social nature of American social science were about to set off the political fireworks.
In the development of professional social science in the United States, the problems of scientific credentials and social relevance had been pervasive. Shortly after the Civil War, amateur social reformers established the American Social Science Association (ASSA) with the hope that the organized collection and dissemination of social facts would provide the basis for a moral and stable social order. But in the next few decades, the ASSA became obsolete, as a more academically oriented and professionally ambitious generation established separate disciplinary associations. By the 1920s, the development of professional scholarship regulated by an ethos of scientific objectivity and disinterested inquiry had, with the strong encouragement of private patrons, gained substantial momentum (Furner, 1975; Haskell, 1977; Reuben, 1996; Ross, 1991).

These developments did not mean, however, that scholars had abandoned the hope of influencing practical affairs. Wesley Mitchell, for one, believed that rigorous scientific investigation would disclose objective, empirical truths and that these findings would then be useful in determining the best means to achieve certain social objectives. In this view, however, the validity of the objectives themselves, together with the underpinning ethical principles, could not be determined through scientific study. As Mitchell explained it, “science does not tell us what we ought to do, or what we want to do,” but “if a science can tell us what consequences follow upon certain lines of action, it puts us in position to make more intelligent choices among possible alternatives” (Mitchell, 1941/1953, p. 374).

Despite its widespread appeal, this view about the scientific status and social utility of social inquiry met sharp challenges. Not only did an important segment of the natural science community tend to see the social part of social inquiry as less than scientific, certain sectors of American social science and social thought always saw moral commitment or ethical inquiry as central to social analysis, even though those who agreed on this point could be far apart on other issues. One sector included the religiously oriented social thinkers who drew inspiration from the Protestant-based Social Gospel Movement or the Catholic Church. Another sector comprised the secularly oriented pragmatists like John Dewey who questioned the sharp distinctions between facts and values, the objective and the subjective, the sciences and the humanities, and between thinking and doing, social inquiry and social action (Dewey, 1927, 1939/1970; Dewey & Childs, 1933/1986; Hollinger, 1980).

Complicating matters further, by the late 1930s, the ideal of the disinterested and value-neutral social science expert had a growing number of vocal detractors (Purcell, 1973, pp. 179–196; M. C. Smith, 1994). As the Great Depression persisted and the forces of militarism, fascism, and nationalism in Asia and Europe gathered momentum, the survival of American democracy and capitalism seemed in danger. As seen by well-known secularly oriented intellectuals on the noncommunist, political left, refraining from value judgments in social science now seemed especially foolish. In Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture, sociologist Robert Lynd warned that the value-neutral scholar was in danger of lecturing on navigation while the ship was sinking. Besides, added Lynd, the allegedly value-free scholar often let values creep into his studies through the back door (Lynd, 1939, pp. 3, 180–201). Lynd, at that time the SSRC’s executive secretary, had aimed his arrows at the heart of the scientistic project cultivated by those like fellow SSRC member Wesley Mitchell. Meanwhile, historian and political scientist Charles Beard called for the “subjection of science to ethical and esthetic purpose,” complained that the “empirical method” by itself could never “develop a complete social philosophy,” and concluded that modern social science, by ignoring such crucial compo-
nents of human life as “morals, purposes, aspirations,” had “disappointed” (Beard, 1933, pp. 510, 506; Beard, 1934; Nore, 1983). 2

New intellectual currents from the sociology of knowledge raised additional questions about the neutral, detached social scientist. At the time, philosophical discussions about the foundations of scientific knowledge often separated the social origins of scientific investigation from the validity of scientific claims. But that separation was directly challenged by Karl Mannheim, a prominent German sociologist and, after 1933, a refugee from the Nazis living in England. In his controversial classic Ideology and Utopia, Mannheim argued that social thought was always rooted in social interests and thus always reflected some social bias. Understanding this basic point would make possible, he explained, “a new type of objectivity in the social sciences . . . not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them” (Mannheim, 1936, p. 5). Here, Mannheim introduced the notion of objective perspectivism, according to which the validity of judgments, including judgments of value, would always take into account the limitations of the position or perspective that accompanied them. For him, this was not merely an academic exercise but a means of developing a new “scientific politics” that would help in overcoming the world crisis by enabling people from varied backgrounds and social positions to understand each other and resolve their conflicts in a tolerant, peaceful manner (Kaiser, 1998; Kettler & Meja, 1995; Mannheim, 1936, pp. 109–91).

Amidst the political and intellectual turmoil of the Depression decade, growing tensions were threatening to tear apart the social science disciplines as well. Toward the end of the 1930s, the main professional societies of sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists were embroiled in internal struggles over seemingly irreconcilable differences concerning the purposes and strategies of social research. In turn, ideological and political disagreement encouraged a proliferation of new special interest groups, journals, and professional organizations to compete with established centers of disciplinary power (Bannister, 1987; Capshew, 1999; Gunnell, 1993; Pandora, 1997).

World War II provided some relief from that confusing state of affairs, but only temporarily. Joining the fight against the Axis Powers, social scientists had many opportunities to demonstrate their practical value, mainly through applied research. By the end of 1942, “virtually all research activities of social psychologists were oriented toward technological problems rather than strictly scientific ones,” observed Dorwin P. Cartwright, a specialist in group dynamics (Cartwright, 1948, p. 334). Consequently, in most cases, wartime conditions left little time for discussing more basic questions about the nature of the social science enterprise. More troubling, as another social psychologist and propaganda expert Leonard W. Doob explained, “many social scientists . . . found their research and scientific wisdom not eagerly accepted, wisely interpreted, or sensibly followed by policy-makers” (Doob, 1947, p. 649), though wartime experiences, satisfactions, and disappointments could also vary widely depending on one’s disciplinary affiliations and specific wartime projects.

2. During the 1930s, there was also growing concern among conservative thinkers in the Catholic and natural law traditions who believed social inquiry should not avoid questions of good and evil, right and wrong. In the 1940s and beyond, this line of conservative criticism continued to have supporters. Obviously, conservatives who criticized the scientistic impulse in American social science would never be satisfied by the postwar effort by the SSRC to hitch a ride on the coattails of the natural scientists. In the present article, I am not examining this particular conservative critique, because it was not central to the discussions among social scientists, whereas the concerns raised by those on the liberal left like Lynd and Beard did receive widespread attention. For a book project on postwar American social science, I am examining the range of conservative criticisms more fully.
As a number of historical studies have shown, the hot and cold wars saw extensive continuities in the social sciences, in their leading personnel, research strategies, and social objectives (Bernstein, 2001; Capshew, 1999; Chomsky et al., 1997; Glander, 2000; Herman, 1995; Simpson, 1994, 1998). But as in so many other areas of American life, continuities from wartime to postwar social science activities could only be imagined or lobbied for or against. This point is especially important when considering the immediate transitional years, roughly from 1945 to 1947, before the Cold War had taken definite shape and before it was clear that American science would be mobilized on a seemingly permanent wartime footing. At that time, it remained to be seen whether the principles, policies, and activities that governed wartime work would be adopted, modified, or abandoned once “peace” returned.

Against this background, the national science policy debate, which intensified and began to take more definite form during 1945, would provide a focal point for national discussion at a pivotal moment in American history. The future of American science and its relationship to the national welfare was at stake, while the future of American social science in that larger context was deeply contested. The course and outcome of this debate would shape the future of American social science to some unknown but surely significant extent.

Of special concern would be a set of recurring controversies about the epistemological foundations, moral relevance, and political character of the social disciplines. In earlier decades, the problems of establishing their intellectual scope and social purpose were debated mainly within the academic disciplines, universities, private research organizations, and philanthropic foundations. But now, as the nation navigated its way into the uncharted waters of the postwar era, those matters would be hotly contested on the public stage. For the social sciences, that stage was not as inviting as it might have been. Truman’s address had brought them into the national discussion, but many others found their presence troubling.

**THE PROBLEMS OF SCIENTIFIC CREDENTIALS AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE**

During extensive legislative hearings in the fall of 1945, representatives from the natural sciences, engineering, medicine, business, labor, Congress, and the executive branch commented on the competing proposals for a new science agency. Many individuals talked briefly about the social sciences, which by that time were incorporated into a revised draft of Kilgore’s bill. The Congress also set aside one day for social science representatives to state their case. Upon first glance, they seem to have fared well. According to one count, out of 99 witnesses, 45 commented on the social sciences, with 37 favoring their inclusion without qualification. The rest favored either their inclusion with some reservations or the creation of a separate social science agency. Not even one witness expressed opposition to federal funding for social science (U.S. Congress, 1971, p. 113).

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that a powerful group of scientists who had ties to the defunct SAB, to NAS, and to the OSRD were supportive of Bush’s postwar science plans and unsupportive when it came to the social sciences. Bush had drawn special attention to the value of “basic science,” research guided by purely “scientific” concerns, “without thought of practical ends.” Though in this definition, basic science itself was not utilitarian in orientation, SEF claimed that, in the long run, basic science was the “pacemaker of technological progress,” as the bomb and other wartime breakthroughs showed (Bush, 1945/1990a, pp. 18, 19). Did this vision of scientific progress extend to the social sciences? According to some of Bush’s closest allies, the answer was a definitive “no.”

Subject matter presented one problem. Researchers had not found any fundamental social laws comparable to those in the natural sciences, stated NAS member and president-elect...
of the American Chemical Society Roger Adams (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 827). Similarly, the engineer Boris A. Bakmetoff explained that “immutable laws of nature” were only found in natural science, while social science dealt with “changing relations between men” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 715). Using a memorable analogy, chemist and NAS member Bradley Dewey proposed that “just as hair and butter should be kept apart,” the social and natural sciences should not be dealt with in the same legislation (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 818).

Social science methods of study were allegedly different as well, proposed Karl Compton. This accomplished experimental physicist claimed that due to important methodological differences between the social and natural sciences, the proposed agency would be more effective if the former were excluded (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 631). Compton’s views reflected his professional trajectory. He was a long-time NAS member, the main architect of the SAB’s unsuccessful Depression-era plans for publicly supported science, MIT’s president, and, during WWII, a key player in Bush’s OSRD (Stratton, 1992). More specific in his methodological comments than Compton was another physicist, I. I. Rabi. Also an NAS member and associate director at MIT’s famed Rad Lab, Rabi appealed to the common view that through the use of experiments, natural scientists and physical scientists in particular had managed to uncover universal truths about the world in an unbiased manner that was “quite objective.” But as this Nobel laureate saw it, the social sciences, in contrast, had tremendous difficulty proving their claims in a rigorous manner (Rigden, 1987; U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 998–999).

Objectivity in the sense of impartiality (Daston & Gallison, 1992) became a central concern for critics in Bush’s circle who believed the social scientists were tarnished by their involvement with social interests. Johns Hopkins President Isaiah Bowman had been the leading American geographer of the interwar era and a key advisor to Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt (Martin, 1980; N. Smith, 2003). Speaking before Congress, Bowman honed in on the vulnerability of social research to distortion by social values and political ideology. That Bowman raised this problem in public might seem odd, because his scientific discipline included both social and physical studies, and his own studies on “regional geography” tried to integrate the two. But Bowman always had greater confidence in the scientific validity of physical geography. It was in the cultural and social side of the disciplines that one found “horrible examples” of “confused thinking” and “shocking inaccuracy and superficiality,” he claimed (Bowman, 1934, p. 227). Besides, as a close professional colleague of Vannevar Bush, a former chair of NAS’s governing body, and the former director of the short-lived SAB, Bowman probably felt no obligation to help out his social science colleagues. “It is well-known that so much of human prejudice . . . and social philosophy enter into the study of social phenomena, that there is the widest difference of opinion as to what constitutes research in many instances in the social sciences,” declared Bowman in a damning assessment (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 23). As he explained further in private correspondence, in light of Kilgore’s connection to “labor,” support for his social science plans might lead to “doctrinal guidance” of research supported by “millions” (England, 1982, p. 49).

A related problem concerned the use of publicly funded social inquiry to support social agendas. If, as Bowman suggested, values could influence social research, then this work, in turn, could be used to promote those values. Federal support might thus end up strengthening preconceived viewpoints on political questions, warned Rabi (U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 998–999). Morris Fishbein, the conservative editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association and another advocate of Bush’s plans, spoke of a “great danger” that social research could be used for “political purposes” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 496). On a congruent note, Bakmetoff cautioned that including the social sciences could attract the interest of “pres-
sure groups,” which would undermine the goal of keeping the agency’s administration safe from “political influence” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 715).

While distinct in principle, epistemological questions were closely related to practical concerns about obtaining public support without paving the way for public control of science. For the scientists above, the alleged contamination of the social sciences by values not only disqualified them as “science”; such contamination, as evidenced by their involvement with “planning” or “labor,” threatened to provoke destructive partisan controversy and thus jeopardize the main goal of creating a central agency for the natural sciences. Summing up the general sentiment, Rabi asserted that “it would not be wise to have them [the social and natural sciences] sink or swim together” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 998).

How did social scientists respond to this multileveled assault? Having been invited to share its views at the 1945 hearings, the Social Science Research Council was now serving as the official voice of American social science (Magnuson, 1945). While it is difficult to know how social scientists at large felt about the SSRC’s role here, apparently nobody complained. More positively, a resolution from the American Psychological Association (APA) asked the SSRC “to take whatever action is feasible to insure the inclusion of the social sciences” (APA, 1945), while a resolution from the American Sociological Society claimed that “it is of the utmost importance that in the interests of the national welfare and safety the social sciences be given recognition and support” (ASS, 1946). Other disciplinary societies conveyed similar sentiments (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1946a, p. 3). Moreover, at the SSRC, representatives of the major national professional societies had already agreed that there were compelling reasons to seek a spot in the proposed agency.

The Council’s selection of witnesses revealed a definite strategy for defending the social science enterprise. Those chosen were all prominent representatives from major scientistic projects and positions developed in previous decades.

**Wesley Mitchell:** The man responsible for presenting the SSRC’s official position to Congress, Mitchell had been chairman and principal executive officer of the SSRC and now was the chairman of the SSRC’s Committee on the Federal Government and Research. As longtime research director at the National Bureau of Economic Research, Mitchell spearheaded an extensive program in empirical, quantitative studies that deliberately put aside advocacy and partisan politics. Through a proper combination of theory and empirical research, scholars, Mitchell anticipated, would one day produce “an economics worthy to be called a science” (Mitchell, 1913; Mitchell, 1946, p. 10; Smith, 1994, pp. 49–83).

**William F. Ogburn:** A Chicago sociologist, former SSRC chairman, and consultant for many governmental committees, including the NRPB, Ogburn carried out pioneering research on science, technology, and social change through which he became well known for developing the concept of “cultural lag.” Having once claimed “we cannot have a science without measurement,” Ogburn encouraged his peers to reject the goal of improving the world in order to concentrate on developing a truly scientific sociology (Ogburn, 1922/1964a, p. 301). Elsewhere, he pointed with enthusiasm to the growing “volume of writing known as social science research . . . sharply distinguished from journalism, propaganda, ethics, philosophy, or essays” (Ogburn, 1934/1964b, p. 214; see also Bannister, 1987, pp. 161–187).

**Edwin Nourse:** An agricultural economist, Nourse was a recent president of the American Economics Association, SSRC chairman from 1942–1945, and in 1947 he would become the first chairman of the nation’s new Council of Economic Advisors (CEA). Nourse always cul-
tivated a detached scholarly posture, even insisting that the CEA’s economists should “pre-
serve the non-political character of the agency” and therefore refused to become a policy ad-
vocate for the White House (Nourse, 1950/1953a, p. 500; see also Knapp, 1979; Nourse,
1953b).

Robert M. Yerkes: A former president of the American Psychological Association, leading pri-
matologist, and emeritus professor from Yale University, Yerkes described himself as a “psycho-
biologist” to Congress. Beginning with WWI, when he had been in charge of the Army’s mas-
sive mental testing program for recruits, Yerkes had much experience trying to convince natural
scientists and governmental officials that psychologists were “working in the spirit, with the ob-
jectives, and, in principle, with the methodologies of the other physical and biological natural
sciences” (Yerkes, 1947, p. 463). Also a NAS member, Yerkes was probably as well informed as
any social scientist about the suspicions held by many of NAS’s natural scientists (Capshew,

John M. Gaus: The 1945 president of the American Political Science Association, Gaus came
from the University of Wisconsin and would soon be moving to Harvard University. Gaus had
gained renown as a public administration specialist, a field of study in which a distinction be-
tween the interest-laden political realm and the objective, apolitical realm of administrative
expertise had long been central (Gaus, 1947).

Further revealingly, the Council did not select a historian to testify, even though the
American Historical Association had been a participating SSRC member since 1925 (Novick,
1988). Presumably, placing a historian before Congress as it deliberated on postwar science
policy would have been risky, given the general American tendency to classify history as part
of the humanities—though historians were following the postwar science policy debate
(Koontz, 1946). Nor did the Council select anyone like Lynd or Beard who would have
wanted to offer a contrary view of the social sciences.

For the SSRC group, it had become especially important to emphasize to politicians and
natural scientists that social research was not, as Bowman charged, subject to “human preju-
dice” and “social philosophy” or, as Fishbein and Bakmetoff had it, the handmaiden of polit-
cical interests or pressure groups. The social sciences had once been “greatly confused by the
mixing in of values with the consideration of knowledge,” acknowledged Ogburn, but this un-
fortunate state of affairs, he quickly added, had been changing as these disciplines matured.
The work of the social scientist was comparable to the work of the natural scientist who might
be involved in making a poison gas but then, keeping within the bounds of his scientific ex-
pertise, would refrain from stating whether it “shall be used for spraying fruit trees or for
killing human beings” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 769)—an analogy that should have seemed
alarming in the light of then-recent revelations of Nazi atrocities. In Ogburn’s words, the sci-
entist aimed “not to tell us what to do,” but to furnish the information necessary for politi-
cians and others to make informed decisions (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 773). “Science prop-
erly considered does not undertake to say what ought to be done,” Mitchell concurred (U.S.
Congress, 1945b, p. 739).

Congress also heard that disinterested social inquiry had its utilitarian payoff, just like
basic work in the natural sciences. Gaus pointed out that some critics sneered that social re-
search, being little more than “the recording of partisan and prejudiced attitudes,” “has no
fruitful result” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 747). But this was mistaken. If “properly trained re-
search workers imbued with scientific detachment and integrity” received “adequate re-
sources,” they could produce results of “inestimable practical value,” claimed the SSRC’s statement to Congress as presented by Mitchell (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 741). All the sciences work in the same manner, added Nourse, as research leads to “fuller and more accurate knowledge” of the world, thus enhancing human control in order to promote a “safer and more satisfying existence” (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 757).

Though more could be said about social scientists’ testimony (Gieryn, 1999), the upshot already seemed clear: the proposed agency should strengthen, not weaken, the “inherent unity of science.” The formal divisions among the physical, biological, and social sciences were “arbitrary,” claimed Nourse (U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 757, 758). “Existing demarcations” among the many sciences were “entirely artificial,” agreed Yerkes (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 755). Regarding research on problems of great “national interest,” one sees that the traditional division between natural and social science has “little meaning,” confirmed the Council’s statement (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 743).

Yet, however often social scientists repeated the mantras of intellectual purity, political neutrality, and scientific unity, they were already in a hole, and that hole would only become deeper in the near future. The SSRC’s scholars recognized that gaining a place in the proposed agency depended on standing together with the natural sciences. But as the science policy debate unfolded, the major protagonists in the scientific and political spheres would agree that unless the social sciences were kept at a safe distance from the natural sciences, they might, as Rabi had warned, “sink together.”

PARTISAN CONFLICT AND POLITICAL VULNERABILITY

To appreciate the power of that warning, we must take a step back to consider wider national struggles involving American science, American politics, and the linkage between the two as the United States itself was struggling to define its position, responsibilities, and interests in the emerging postwar order.

In the immediate postwar years, a contingent of liberal-left scientists became worried about the ability of American science to promote certain national and international ideals. With the intensification of postwar hostilities between the American-led and Soviet-led camps, this group feared that military patronage for American science and associated security restrictions would remain extensive. As a means of promoting a peaceful world order, they favored the international control of atomic energy. On the domestic side, they supported New Deal-style antimonopoly and planning measures, including a national full employment policy. This liberal-left-led group, closely associated with the newly formed Federation of Atomic Scientists, or FAS (later, Federation of American Scientists), also supported Kilgore’s efforts to establish a science agency responsive to social interests (A. K. Smith, 1965; Wang, 1995, 1999).

But the course of postwar developments proved inhospitable for them, as a rightward national shift enabled a conservative contingent within the nation’s scientific elite to obtain a dominant postwar presence. A few exceptions aside, this conservative group looked more favorably upon the postwar expansion of military science, urged adversarial policies toward the Soviet Union, and opposed various liberal domestic policy initiatives. In the NSF debate, this conservative group, which included Bush’s personal friends and close professional colleagues (like Compton and Bowman), as well as supporters from engineering, medicine, and chemistry (like Bakmetoff, Fishbein, Adams, and Dewey), rallied around Bush’s plans and opposed Kilgore’s (Wang, 1995, 1999).

In this broader context, national consideration about the social sciences also became a partisan issue, just what the SSRC’s social scientists who declared their enterprise to be apo-
political were hoping to avoid. On one side, the Democratic White House indicated that the social sciences should be included; a revised draft of Kilgore's bill did just this. During the hearings, Kilgore declared his personal support (U.S. Congress, 1945b, p. 632), while social scientists testified in favor of his bill. Other testimony revealed a wider base of liberal supporters, notably Truman's Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace, a long-time advocate of the social sciences and the main representative of the New Deal in Truman's Cabinet (U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 137, 140). In the coming years, Wallace's commitment to cooperation with the Soviet Union would lead to a split with Truman, then to a crushing defeat as the presidential candidate of the left-liberal Progressive Party in 1948 (M. L. Kleinman, 2000). On the other side, a conservative group of scientists attacked the social sciences and favored Magnuson's bill. They were joined mainly by conservative Democrats and Republicans. Magnuson himself indicated that since funding for the natural sciences was the top priority, the social sciences, whose consideration might well delay the passage of satisfactory legislation, should be dealt with later (U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 51–52).

The divide grew wider. Alarmed by the Truman administration's position, Isaiah Bowman became the leader of a group called the Committee Supporting the Bush Report. A November letter from Bowman's group to Truman, signed by Bakmetoff and Dewey among others, specified that to include the social sciences would be a "serious mistake" and proposed that their support should come from "a separate body" (U.S. Congress, 1945b, pp. 1127–1128). A counterpart to Bowman's group called the Committee for a National Science Foundation was formed in December under the leadership of Harvard astronomer and leading FAS member Harlow Shapley and Nobel laureate nuclear chemist Harold C. Urey (Shapley, 1969). Included in the Urey-Shapley group were the SSRC's contingent of Mitchell, Ogburn, Yerkes, Nourse, and Gaus, as well as other prominent social scientists including sociologists Talcott Parsons and Louis Wirth, who will figure prominently in this story later (Anonymous, 1946). With this group's approval, Kilgore introduced a new bill that called for a social science division.

Yet, in a critical blow to the social sciences, Kilgore, as he was trying to work out a bipartisan compromise, soon retreated on this point. Kilgore and Magnuson introduced a compromise bill in February that initially called for a social science division. But Kilgore's subcommittee pointed out that same month that the agency's social science activities should be limited "until adequate planning studies" were completed. The parent committee's stance was similarly cautious, with the Committee on Military Affairs recommending that, at least initially, the agency's support of social research should "be limited to studies of the impact of scientific discoveries on the general welfare and studies required in connection with other projects supported by the Foundation" (U.S. Congress, 1971, p. 114). As Kilgore later explained, the move to limit the scope of social science activities reflected an agreement made between leading scientists and members of the two subcommittees (Congressional Record—Senate, 3 July 1946, pp. 8231–8232).

Having lost Kilgore as a valuable ally, the social sciences became increasingly vulnerable to the hostility of conservative legislators supportive of Bush's plans. Those legislators were already engaged in various efforts to dismantle New Deal programs and suffocate their postwar progeny. Though conservatives had already killed the social science–led NRPB, its spirit had survived in other political forms, provoking vigilant conservatives into action.

Thus, with the same passion that motivated the attack on the NRPB, a coalition of conservative southern Democrats and Republicans repeatedly barraged the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE). Like the NRPB, the Bureau had been working on the development of national social and economic planning programs. In 1942,
Congress forbade the BAE from engaging in further planning work. It then cut funding for the BAE’s social survey research and, in 1946, when BAE member and American Sociological Society President Carl C. Taylor was proclaiming that “national planning is not dead” (Taylor, 1946, p. 386), Congress forbade the BAE from carrying out such research altogether, effectively “crippling the work of social scientists” (Anonymous, n.d.; Hardin, 1946; Kirkendall, 1966). In another visible case, conservatives opposed a liberal initiative, inspired by the NRPB and promoted by a contingent of young Keynesian economists, to make the government responsible for maintaining full employment. By the time the 1946 Employment Act—which created the Council of Economic Advisers—became law, conservatives had removed the original bill’s strongest measures so that the government no longer had a mandate to achieve full employment (Bailey, 1950; Barber, 1996; NRPB, 1942b). In a third sensitive arena, conservatives opposed social science calls to reform race relations, including a proposal for racial integration in the armed forces (Bogart, 1969). As Mitchell’s SSRC Committee noted, popular calls to eliminate or restrict the influence of “professors” in government were typically directed at social scientists (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1944, p. 4).

The implications of conservative attacks for the continuing national science policy debate were grim—especially without Kilgore’s commitment to protect the social sciences. In another round of Senate hearings held during the spring of 1946, Republicans provided the most damaging charges. Compared to criticisms put forth by natural scientists, their rhetorical barbs had more specific political content, but basic points about the questionable character of social science remained the same.

Federal support for social research would mean “promoting all the health legislation . . . all the housing legislation . . . all the other matters which come in under the all-inclusive term of ‘social sciences’,” thundered Ohio Republican Senator Robert Taft (Congressional Record—Senate, 2 July 1946, p. 8145). A heavyweight among congressional conservatives and an ardent opponent of New Deal Democrats, Taft had been an outspoken critic of the NRPB and helped to emasculate the 1946 Employment Act. His best-known legislative achievement would be the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which passed over Truman’s veto and sharply curtailed the powers of organized labor (Patterson, 1972). Without missing a beat, Taft insisted that a new science agency “should not turn to social sciences,” which, in his unflattering description, were little more than “politics” (Congressional Record—Senate, 2 July 1946, p. 8145). These disciplines did not belong in a bill designed to promote “pure science, the discovery of truth,” agreed H. Alexander Smith, a New Jersey senator and, by this point, the main Republican advocate for an agency that followed SEF (Congressional Record—Senate, 3 July 1946, p. 8231).

Moving in for the kill, Smith offered an amendment that would, among other things, have eliminated any support for the social disciplines. Although the Senate rejected his amendment, Connecticut Republican Thomas C. Hart put forth a new one specifically to delete the problematic disciplines. “No agreement has been reached with reference to what social science really means. It may include philosophy, anthropology, all the racial questions, all kinds of economics, including political economics, literature, perhaps religion, and various kinds of ideology,” explained Hart. Like Smith, Hart could see “no connection” between social research and basic research in the natural sciences (Congressional Record—Senate, 3 July 1946, pp. 8230, 8232). After the Senate voted favorably on Hart’s amendment, Congress then approved the Magnuson-Kilgore bill with Hart’s amendment.

3. For some unknown reason, conservative southern Democrats were not a major presence in this episode, though one might expect that they shared many concerns with Republicans.
That spring, the social sciences took a nosedive in the House as well. With the encouragement of Bush and Bowman, who had always favored legislation closer to the original Magnuson and Mills bills, Mills introduced a new House bill that omitted the social sciences. Involvement with these disciplines would invite “political, social and economical [sic] disputes” that would seriously compromise the agency’s support of the natural sciences, warned Mills (U.S. Congress, 1946, p. 20). Support for social science might also lead to “hare-brained studies about things not capable of objective study,” chimed Bowman (U.S. Congress, 1946, p. 14). To explain the dire implications for American scientists, there was Ohio Republican Clarence J. Brown’s colorful commentary: “If the impression becomes prevalent in the Congress that this legislation is to establish some sort of an organization in which there would be a lot of short-haired women and long-haired men messing into everybody’s personal affairs and lives, inquiring whether they love their wives or do not love them and so forth, you [the scientists] are not going to get your legislation” (U.S. Congress, 1946, p. 13).

Since support for the Magnuson-Kilgore compromise bill crumbled in the summer of 1946 (Meyerhoff, 1946), the status of the social sciences remained unsettled. But this respite proved to be fleetingly brief, as the power of political conservatives continued to increase. National elections in November gave the Republicans control of both legislative branches, thereby strengthening the hand of a decidedly anti-New Deal, anticommunist group that included Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy. Additionally, Senate conservatives placed the science legislation in the hands of a subcommittee chaired by Senator Smith, already a known opponent of the social sciences.

Smith then pushed through a bill that did not exclude the social sciences altogether, but neither did it mention them specifically. Its “whole emphasis,” nevertheless, was on the natural sciences (Congressional Record—Senate, 14 May 1947, p. 5258). Though Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright asked his colleagues to support a new initiative to include a social science division, his effort proved futile—predictably so, since Fulbright was a liberal Democrat (Congressional Record—Senate, 20 May 1947, pp. 5511–5512; Woods, 1995). After the Senate passed Smith’s bill by a wide margin, the House and Senate, in the summer of 1947, agreed on another compromise bill that did not mention the social sciences (D. L. Kleinman, 1995, p. 132).

At this point, the social sciences still had one last hope: the White House. Only the President might have had the power to reverse this downward spiral. Truman had offered his support before. But as shown by the case of the President’s Scientific Research Board (PSRB), Truman also was willing to abandon the social sciences. The PSRB was charged with developing a liberal counterproposal to Bush’s SEF. If Truman had wanted the social sciences to be included, the PSRB surely would have obliged. Instead, the Board’s 1947 report merely acknowledged their importance then left an investigation of their needs to someone else, the position Vannevar Bush had originally taken (PSRB, 1947, p. viii).

Meanwhile, nearly the entire natural science community pulled back as well. Once political support for the social sciences became vanishingly thin, few scientists were willing to take more than a weak stance on their behalf. Results of a 1947 questionnaire administered by the Inter-Society Committee, a group consisting of two representatives from dozens of national scientific and educational organizations, indicated a pervasive willingness among scientists to leave these disciplines aside. Even though 49 percent of the respondents favored specific inclusion of the social sciences and 48 percent favored permissive legislation, this was not the whole story. When asked about arrangements that might facilitate an acceptable political compromise, 99 percent said they would support permissive legislation and 37 percent would also accept the exclusion of the social sciences altogether (U.S. Congress, 1947,
So, nearly everyone would approve of legislation that only permitted (and thus did not require) support for social science, just as the 1947 compromise legislation accepted by the House and Senate had it and as President Truman now tacitly accepted.

The debate over other science policy matters would drag on for a few more years, but as it did, social scientists could only watch nervously from their by-now-familiar position on the sidelines. The Hart amendment to exclude them, though not the final act in this story, had underscored their political vulnerability. Few after 1946 and hardly anybody after 1947 paid attention to the social sciences. To wit, Congress never even invited them back as a group to testify. In the best of moments, they had received encouragement, mainly from liberal Democrats. Yet from the outset, the Democratic Party had never been united in this episode, as indicated by the roles of Senator Magnuson and Representative Mills. Most troubling, crucial liberal supporters, including Senator Kilgore and the Truman White House, deserted the social sciences. One year after putting forth an amendment to include them, Senator Fulbright gave up as well, noting that some of his legislative peers still wondered whether an amendment supporting the social sciences meant “socialism” (Congressional Record—Senate, 4 May 1948, p. 5251). Meanwhile, increasingly powerful conservative politicians joined conservative natural scientists in situating social inquiry outside the “scientific” realm and inside the presumably very different realms of “philosophy,” “ideology,” and “politics.”

Berated and belittled, social scientists understood that this protracted battle for public support cut to the core of their professional identity and had serious implications for their future development. Following the Hart amendment, SSRC discussions pointed out that American social science faced “a problem of salesmanship.” Social scientists had to work hard on “clarifying their functions and convincing the public of their value” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1946a, p. 4).

IDENTITY, IMAGE, AND SALESMANSHIP

The course of legislative proceedings prompted social scientists to concentrate on improving their tarnished public image. Because the critics’ attacks were so extensive, this was not a simple task. It was also not simple because not all social scientists genuinely wanted to follow the lead of the natural sciences. One could form an alliance with natural scientists and claim a profound affinity for the purpose of winning public support, but would not this strategy then lead to national policies that forced social scientists in this direction as well? Whether that approach would be adequate for the challenges that lay ahead in the troubled age deserved consideration. Once again, the SSRC would become a central site for deliberations. Also once again, practical concerns about cultivating public support for social science would loom large. Consider the Council’s dealings, first with Louis Wirth and then with Talcott Parsons.

In early 1946, the Council asked Wirth to prepare a memorandum about the status of the social sciences in the proposed agency. A highly regarded figure from the “Chicago School” of sociology, Wirth would become the first Jewish president of the American Sociological Association in 1947 and the first president of the new International Sociological Association in 1950. A pioneer in the ecological approach to urban studies, he wrote widely on race relations, minority problems, social planning, and social theory. In a 1946 essay on “The Unfinished Business of American Democracy,” Wirth explained that the nation should use its newfound power “wisely to heal the wounds of an ailing world and to build a peaceful and a better way of life for ourselves and for all.” Recognizing that “external strength” depended on “internal unity,” Wirth called upon Americans to realize the promise of “equality of opportu-
nity for all, irrespective of race, creed, or origin.” New Deal-style public programs and policies in employment, housing, and public services should “validate” national “ideals,” which, noted Wirth, had required great sacrifice during World War II (Salerno, 1987; Wirth, 1946b, pp. 1, 2, 7). What type of social science could help?

As Wirth thought about the anxious postwar era, the critiques of scientism raised so pointedly during the 1930s seemed relevant. As the English translator of Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia, Wirth had characterized Mannheim’s distinctive contribution as having shown that “thought . . . becomes fully comprehensible only if it is viewed sociologically. This involves the tracing of the bases of social judgments to their specific interest-bound roots in society” (Wirth, 1936, p. xxvi; Wirth, 1947a). During the war years, Wirth served as editor of An American Dilemma, a widely influential study on American race relations supported with extensive funding from the Carnegie Corporation and written by Gunnar Myrdal. Myrdal, a Swedish economist and European-style social democrat, argued that “valuations will, when driven underground, hinder observation and inference.” So to become “truly objective,” social scientists would have to make their valuations “explicit” (Jackson, 1990; Myrdal, 1944, p. 1043; Southern, 1987). Wirth, like Myrdal, and much like Dewey, Beard, Lynd, and Mannheim, did not believe that such an orientation undermined the validity or utility of social inquiry. To the contrary, they believed that an open discussion about the value orientation of research would make social science more honest, realistic, and useful. Sensitive to the socially embedded character of social inquiry and insistent that social scientists should address the gap between democratic ideals and undemocratic realities, Wirth hoped to redirect the national controversy about the social sciences.

Writing to the SSRC in May 1946, Wirth complained that the Kilgore-Magnuson compromise bill only provided a small, reactive, and dangerously narrow role for the social disciplines—by then Kilgore’s concession to conservatives had led to the elimination of a social science division. As the bill stood, the proposed agency would confine social research “to the relatively narrow field of predicting and analyzing the impact of technology upon social life,” cautioned Wirth. Convinced that the postwar era required advances in “ethical” and “political” “wisdom,” he feared that the effort to achieve “neutrality,” the movement toward “small problems . . . technical proficiency rather than comprehensive understanding,” would lead to “irrelevance.” Again, Lynd, Beard, Dewey, Mannheim, and Myrdal had made similar points. As Wirth stated it, the social sciences “must be centrally concerned with the nature of the good life and the institutions that serve it” (Wirth, 1946a). Elsewhere, Wirth explained that “no amount of aping . . . the natural sciences . . . will be sufficient” (Wirth, 1947b, p. 148).

If one focuses only on the public testimony of social scientists, one could easily surmise that emerging from the wartime years there existed a widespread consensus about the need to extricate social research from the influence of social values and critical analysis. Wirth’s views, together with the well-known voices that echoed them, suggest the need for a closer look. In fact, in the early postwar years, Beard, Dewey, Lynd, and Myrdal all continued to write in the same vein as before (Beard, 1948; Dewey, 1947; Lynd, 1949; Myrdal, 1954). Mannheim died in 1947, but his views remained widely known and debated. Continuing discussions at the SSRC also suggest how little was settled. Since the multidimensional problem of values in the social sciences came up often at meetings, the SSRC’s leaders decided to seek clarification through the support of university study groups.

But the Council’s effort mainly served to emphasize the extent of the problem. At the University of Chicago, arguably the single most important university in the development of American social science during the first half of the twentieth century, there had been endless
debate about the proper scope and social responsibilities of the social sciences. Fittingly, at Chicago, Wirth became chair of the new SSRC-supported University Sub-Committee on Social Sciences and Values. As he explained to the Sub-Committee’s members, their task was “to discuss what the social sciences have to contribute to ethics and social policy and how in turn ethical and policy considerations affect the social sciences” (Chicago Sub-Committee on Social Science and Values, 1949, p. 1). However, after ten biweekly seminar sessions in the first half of 1949, the Chicago group had arrived at no consensus. Wirth reported back to the Council that there was only agreement that the challenge of determining how values and social research influence each other was a complex and unresolved problem, which, unfortunately, was often “avoided by busy social scientists” (Wirth, 1949, p. 1; Wirth, n.d.).

Returning to the SSRC and the national science policy debate, however, we find that neither the position outlined by Wirth in May 1946 nor the continuing scholarly debate about values, research, and the profession made it into the public arena. After all, adopting Wirth’s position as the Council’s own would only have exacerbated the critics’ concerns about important differences between the social and natural sciences. Not to mention that at the 1945 hearings, Mitchell and other SSRC scholars had testified that there were no such differences, at least none that should call into doubt the place of the social sciences under a global scientific umbrella. Backtracking in public would have made American social scientists look foolish or at least deeply confused. If, as Wirth noted in relation to the nation, “external strength” depended on “internal unity,” the same principle could be applied to American social science. At least the SSRC’s leaders were not about to parade fundamental disagreements among social scientists across the national stage. Remember, too, that in the first half of 1946, the fortunes of social science in the postwar science debate were heading toward rock bottom.

At the same time, the Council’s effort to address the related problems of image management and professional identity was expanding along many fronts, with an emphasis on “strengthening operational ties with natural scientists on all levels” and “improving public relations . . . through publicity directed both to laymen and specialists in other fields” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1946a, p. 4). Thus, the SSRC purchased and distributed free of charge 5,000 copies of a pamphlet written by liberal New York Times science editor Waldemar Kaempffert, who called for federal patronage of science and “a closer union of the natural and social scientists” (Kaempffert, 1946, p. 20). Council members also suggested that placing articles in Science or some other widely read journal with a similar audience could help to explain “the unity of all scientific inquiry” (SSRC Committee on Problems and Policy, 1946b, pp. 1, 12). In a more ambitious endeavor, the Council sought a major national statement on social science. For help, the SSRC turned to Talcott Parsons.

At first glance, Parsons might seem no better suited than Wirth for such a sensitive task. The two were on good professional and personal terms: the younger Parsons had great respect for Wirth (Parsons, 1939), Wirth had stayed at the Parsons’ home on a 1937 visit to Cambridge (Wirth, 1937a), and, ten years later, Wirth appointed Parsons as a representative from the American Sociological Association to the Inter-Society Committee, which was considering postwar national science legislation (Wirth, 1947c). Parsons, a leader at Harvard’s new interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations and a towering figure in postwar social science, became well known for his analysis of social systems and the associated effort to develop a universally valid theory of social action (Parsons, 1951, 1970). Though his interest in the stability of social systems later came under heavy fire for its conservative implications, Parsons was not a political conservative by the standards of his day. More of a liberal Democrat, Parsons, not unlike Wirth, had been sympathetic to ambitious New Deal ideas about national economic regulation, though in the post-WWII years, his views on this point...
became more moderate (Brick, 1993, 2000). Also similar to Wirth, Parsons found the rise of the political right and McCarthyism alarming (Parsons, 1954). Both positions could easily antagonize conservative critics.

In addition, Parsons’s intellectual orientation contained elements that challenged a simplistic conception of a unified scientific enterprise. His grand project required attention to subjective, value-laden components of social life. Drawing upon earlier European social theorists, Parsons took a keen interest in the interpretive sociology of Max Weber, himself a complex figure who had insisted that social inquiry could be scientific and objective but that social researchers also needed to pay attention to subjective meanings, a task with no close parallel in natural science inquiry. On a related point, Parsons believed that social scientists should study the values present in a given society in order to illuminate how they functioned to promote or undermine social order (Parsons, 1935, 1937, 1947a), a task Wirth (as well as Dewey, Lynd, Beard, Mannheim, or Myrdal) could have agreed with and another dimension of social inquiry absent from the natural sciences. So, given the sharply polarized character of the postwar science debate, these elements of Parsons’s thinking could have challenged the notion of the unity of science in basic ways.

Yet in other respects, Parsons might seem a wise choice. He believed that even if certain social science methods had no close counterparts in the natural sciences, in the big picture the social and natural sciences were complementary parts of a unified intellectual and professional enterprise, as he explained in a series of articles on the national science debate. Concerned that “naive, popular misunderstandings” had portrayed the social sciences as “a haven for crack-brained reformers” and “a glorified form of social work” that could not “rise above partisan politics,” Parsons claimed it was “impossible to draw any distinct line between the natural and social sciences.” If the practical accomplishments of the natural sciences were the more impressive, then the nation should support the “future promise” of a “social technology,” proposed Parsons (Parsons, 1946a, pp. 660–662; Parsons, 1946b; Parsons, 1947b, 1947c; see also Klausner & Lidz, 1985). Though far from new in the annals of American social science, such an engineering perspective resonated especially well with recent wartime contributions by social scientists (Jordan, 1994).

Parsons also believed that social scientists could and should establish fruitful relationships with natural scientists. He himself owed a substantial intellectual debt to the Harvard biochemist Lawrence J. Henderson. During the 1930s, Henderson had been the central figure in a circle of Cambridge intellectuals interested in applying the concept of the “social system” to the social sciences. Parsons, as much as anyone, carried that orientation into the future (Barber, 1970). In lobbying for the creation of Harvard’s Department of Social Relations, Parsons also depended upon the support of University president and accomplished chemist James B. Conant, who, not incidentally, was second-in-command at the OSRD under Bush and was now promoting Bush’s postwar science plans (Hershberg, 1993; Johnston, 1998). In addition, starting in 1946, Parsons was serving as chairman of the new Cambridge Committee of Natural and Social Scientists, whose members were engaged in addressing various problems regarding atomic energy (Parsons, 1946–1947). Parsons would therefore have been unlikely to imply that Conant and other natural scientists really did not understand what the social sciences were about. Moreover, Parsons agreed with the SSRC’s view that being excluded from the proposed agency “would impose a great handicap” (Parsons, 1946a, p. 666).

Thus, contrary to Wirth, Parsons saw that social scientists would be wise to seek public support by “riding in on the coattails” of natural scientists (Parsons, 1946a, p. 660). This curious phrasing had an equally curious origin. It had originally come to Parsons from the pen of a hard-core conservative in Bush’s camp named John Teeter, who had advised Parsons that as
far as the social sciences were concerned, “a coattail ride” would be “better than none” (Teeter, 1946, p. 3). Hoping that social scientists like himself would be permitted onto the “endless frontier,” Parsons incorporated Teeter’s language into a published account of the legislative controversy. In doing so, Parsons revealed an eagerness to reassure conservative critics that the social sciences would not be a threat. After all, those who would ride your coattails might be a drag, but they will hardly be in a position to challenge your authority to lead.

So with a concerned yet also hopeful outlook, Parsons accepted $10,000 from the SSRC as payment for a national statement. He also joined the Council’s newly reconstituted Committee on the Federal Government and Research, now chaired by Robert Yerkes. The Committee’s members repeated “several times” the need to correct “the mistaken concepts of social science research held by many [natural] scientists.” Council scholars hoped that Parsons’s finished product would be “analogous” to Bush’s already famous report on the natural sciences (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1946b, pp. 3, 4).

In a lengthy draft, the Harvard star addressed the major points of public dispute. Parsons claimed it was generally impossible to say with reason that “the scientific method” should be used to study “nature” but not “man in society.” In an effort against the suggestion that the social sciences were similar to the humanities, he explained that the humanistic approach was “oriented much more to appreciation than to analysis, prediction, and control.” Unfortunately, however, misplaced associations between social science and social reform often confused public figures, who at this critical historical moment needed to understand the capabilities but also the limits of social science. In Parsons’s view, a proper understanding of modern social research would emphasize its highly technical character, which lent itself only to piecemeal applications, not large-scale social reconstruction. Skeptics in the political and scientific communities could thus rest assured that American social scientists were not behind dangerous philosophies of life that called for the “total reconstruction of society,” such as Marxism. On the matter of federal patronage, it thus became especially important to support “pure research,” free from “nonscientific pressure” associated with applied studies (Parsons, 1948/1986, pp. 42, 43, 105, 111).

“The whole argument” was that social science “logically belongs” in the proposed agency. Concerned, as were other social scientists, about the spread of “anti-longhair sentiment” in Congress and the common premise that social inquiry was “political” rather than “scientific” in nature (Parsons, 1948/1986, pp. 106, 109), Parsons thus followed the SSRC’s public relations strategy of underplaying any differences between the social and natural sciences.

But in stark contrast to SEF’s acclaim, Parsons’s manuscript encountered paralyzing problems. Indicative of the great significance attached to this effort in salesmanship, the Council sent his manuscript to dozens of reviewers. One suspects that the presence of conflicting visions of social science made it difficult to craft a widely acceptable public document. Another potential problem was Parsons’s enthusiasm for the “rational, engineering control” of social relations and countercyclical economic policies, points that would have infuriated conservatives in Congress (Parsons, 1948/1986, p. 107). But the main problem seems to have concerned the fit, or lack thereof, between product and consumer. Parsons’s prose was notoriously turgid, and a number of Parsons’s peers suggested that his manuscript would be inaccessible to the intended nonspecialist audiences—namely, natural scientists, politicians, and the more educated segments of the general public. This last criticism raised doubts about the likelihood that Parsons’s piece would improve the problematic public image of the social sciences (SSRC Board of Directors, 1948, pp. 10–14).

Writing in 1948 to SSRC President Pendleton Herring, Samuel Wilks reported that many reviewers thought further work on the draft might make it useful for other social scientists and
their graduate students, but this meant abandoning the initial game plan. Wilks, a mathematical statistician and active proponent of quantitative social analysis, explained that even after going over parts of Parsons’s draft three times or more, he still found it “difficult to read” (Wilks, 1948, 1967). A prominent figure in the so-called behavioral revolution that came to dominate American political science during the 1950s (Gunnell, 1993, pp. 221–250; Herring, 1940), Herring himself worked tirelessly to strengthen the scientific credentials and political respectability of American social science. So it was certainly with regret that Herring too concluded that the manuscript needed “drastic revision” (Herring, n.d.). While Parsons made further changes over the next couple of years, he never completed his report for publication.4

Though this brings us to the end of our story in this article, I want to note that the Council was by no means done with its promotional efforts. The SSRC had never regarded the Parsons report as “sufficient in itself . . . if an actual inroad is to be made upon the misunderstandings and resistances which the social sciences are encountering” (SSRC Committee on the Federal Government and Research, 1947, pp. 5–6). In the coming years, the Council remained the most important national organization for the social sciences. It continued to provide valuable funds for research, fellowships, and conferences and remained a key site for strategies and projects designed to improve the public image and clarify the professional identity of American social science. Among other things, the Council provided support and guidance for a best seller on the social sciences written by Stuart Chase, The Proper Study of Mankind (Chase, 1948). The Council became a main source of advice once the new National Science Foundation began in the early 1950s to move (cautiously) into the controversy-laden social science arena (Kleinman & Solovey, 1995, pp. 18–24). During the height of the McCarthy era, Herring also defended American social science and its private patrons against some of the harshest anticommunist critics in the Congress (U.S. Congress, 1954, pp. 794–865). In these cases and many more, the Council proved to be a persistent supporter in the postwar era of what mainstream proponents claimed was the most rigorously scientific type of social inquiry and the most respectable brand of professionalism. Meanwhile, critics saw a scientistic and thus impoverished investigative orientation, an allegedly apolitical professionalism that rested upon a naïve view of the potential contributions and responsibilities of the social sciences in modern society. But as suggested by the course of the postwar science debate, critics on the liberal left would, for the most part, be relegated to the sidelines, until the growth of antiwar sentiment, social turmoil, and associated intellectual rebellions during the mid-1960s would once again give their kind a wider hearing (Solovey, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article, I have argued that the postwar national science debate constituted a crucial transitional moment in the history of American social science. At that time, national leaders were arguing over the purposes and structures of the emerging postwar national science establishment. The federal government became a major participant in the long-standing arguments about scientific legitimacy and social utility in American social science. And conservative political and scientific voices critical of American social science were gaining the upper hand in postwar national science policy. At this critical juncture and under these diffi-

4. The SSRC project only came to a complete halt in 1951, after Parsons attempted a collaboration with another sociologist, John W. Riley Jr. (Riley, 1985).
cult conditions, American social scientists were forced to confront long-standing questions about their intellectual orientation and professional identity.

Working through the SSRC, leading American social scientists decided that they would seek public support and scientific legitimacy on the “endless frontier.” The Council’s strategy amounted to a reassertion of a scientistic identity for professional social science. Even though the SSRC’s efforts to promote the social sciences in this manner were not all that successful in the immediate postwar science debate, I have argued that the Council’s deliberations and activities still revealed much about the shaky status and uncertain future of American social science more widely. It was not obvious that well-known critiques of the scientistic project and particularly its association with value-neutral inquiry and a disinterested professional stance as put forth by Lynd, Beard, Dewey, Mannheim, Myrdal, and then Wirth had been answered effectively. It was also not obvious that Wirth’s specific warnings about important dissimilarities between social and natural science studies or the need for ethical wisdom in the precarious age ahead were misguided. Such issues, though more commonly associated with the ferment of the 1930s, were far from resolved when the United States entered World War II, while wartime conditions themselves did not allow for much attention to such matters. So beneath the statements prepared for public consumption by the SSRC and its social scientists, we encounter a continuing controversy about the role of values in social science and about the social role of the social scientist.

But in seeking the acceptance of more powerful and often bitingly skeptical political and scientific actors, Mitchell, Nourse, Ogburn, Yerkes, Gaus, Parsons, and the Council’s social science leadership more generally consistently downplayed any differences between the social and natural sciences. This is not to suggest that they really did not believe that social and natural science had a lot in common, though Parsons definitely recognized important differences that he chose to gloss over. Nor is it to propose that in developing their views for public consumption they were being deceitful, though they were certainly acting strategically. But in many ways, their public pronouncements and more private discussions in the area of “salesmanship” bore the imprint of their shaky public status. Of course, the directions of postwar social science were also being debated and shaped at numerous other important sites (i.e., universities, disciplinary societies, professional journals, private foundations, independent research institutes, and military and intelligence agencies—to name the most obvious ones). Nevertheless, this article has shown why the Council’s deliberations and actions were of critical importance in defining the enterprise of American social science in a nonthreatening fashion, with an emphasis on technical, nonpartisan, and value-neutral professional expertise, a stance strikingly reminiscent of similar efforts in the early twentieth century.

But at what price? A committed social science in the sense put forth by decidedly liberal American scholars like Dewey, Lynd, Beard, and Wirth, and by socially engaged European voices like Mannheim and Myrdal, would have pursued normative research and “ethical wisdom,” would have been wary of the impact of politics and patronage on the academic community, and would have encouraged critical attention to matters of morality, justice, and power in American society. Perhaps such an enterprise could have articulated a more powerful counterpoint to the rightward lurch in American society and politics that, by the late 1940s, had given conservatives substantial power to cast those who stood anywhere to the left of a restricted centrist position on pressing domestic and foreign policy issues as “un-American.” But despite some notable exceptions on the liberal left like C. Wright Mills (Mills, 1959; see also Horowitz, 1983), mid-century American social scientists commonly emphasized technical rigor rather than critical analysis, the stability of American democracy and the productivity of American capitalism rather than their limitations, the extent and virtues of social consensus rather than the sources of legitimate social conflict, professional service by scholars to
the national-security state rather than independent assessment of its unseemly dimensions. In sum, not only did the postwar science debate take place at a crucial historical juncture for American science and social science, but, when placed in a wider and longer perspective, the SSRC’s contested decision to hitch a ride on the “coattails” of the natural sciences becomes a significant event in the rocky histories of the “other sciences” and American liberalism.

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