Review: Shannon on *Cold War Social Science*

Posted on July 20, 2012 by L.D. Burnett


Reviewed by Christopher Shannon

**Social Science as Soulcraft**

As an academic genre, the edited volume of essays has a storied past in U.S. intellectual history. The essays in John Higham and Paul Conkin’s *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (1979) and Richard Fox and Jackson Lears’s *The Culture of Consumption* (1983) revolutionized the discipline and spawned hundreds of full-length studies. *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, edited by Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, may not app game-changing status of these classic works, but it far surpasses the run of the mill conference proceedings that many academic presses still feel compelled to publish. The volume’s contribution lies less in charting the new than in re-charting the old. The relationship between the Cold War and social science has been a staple of U.S. intellectual history since the time of C. Wright Mills. Though none of the essays in the collection deal with him directly, the specter of Mills hangs over the essays through their persistent attention to the relation of knowledge to power. The essays ultimately fail to confront the contradictions of Mills’s humanism—which, in retrospect, appear to be the contradictions of a much broader modern, secular humanism. Having rejected religious and metaphysical conceptions of the soul, social scientists nonetheless have persistently sought to fashion some secular understanding of human nature. In connecting issues of knowledge and power to questions of human nature, the essays in this volume often unknowingly suggest possibilities for moving beyond the facile distinctions between repressive and emancipatory social science that have shaped the critique and defense of social science since the era of the cold war.
The volume grew out of papers delivered at a workshop at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in May 2010. That many of the contributors are not from the United States and come from more specialized disciplines such as the history and philosophy of science helps to account for the relative lack of attention to familiar, canonical figures of mainstream U.S. intellectual history. As such canonical figures have been well-studied already, their absence is no mark against the collection. The question to ask is not “why isn’t there an essay on C. Wright Mills?,” but “why should we bother looking at Cold War social science?” In his introductory essay, “Cold War Social Science: Specter, Reality, or Useful Concept?,” Mark Solovey answers this question by presenting these essays as a contribution to contemporary debates about knowledge, liberal democracy and human nature. To those who might question whether social science has anything helpful to contribute to this debate, Solovey simply replies that “life now goes on against a background of social science” and “we cannot seem to get along without the social sciences.”[1] Having accepted social science as a de facto arbiter of reality, Solovey envisions the task of the historian as chronicling the contours of how social science rose to this position of cultural authority—that is, to ask the question, how did we get to where we are today?

The short answer to this rather Whiggish question would seem to be: through massive public and private funding of social science projects and an enduring faith in the power of social science to solve real life problems despite the lack of any supportive empirical evidence. The long answer, scattered implicitly and explicitly throughout the essays in the volume, seems to be that social science is a good thing and the best intellectual framework through which to understand our world. In this respect, the essays in this collection participate in the current neo-liberal moment in which the old battle lines of liberal and radical have dissolved into the warm fuzzy consensus of “progressive.” Even as the book’s title evokes a classic radical critique of the relation between power and knowledge, Solovey frames the essays as a revision of the (by now old) New Left critique that social scientists “relinquished their duty to speak truth to power” and “often ignored the unjust and repressive character of American society and its foreign policies” (4). For Solovey, this is all too simple. He persuasively argues that the Cold War may not in the end be the most appropriate context for understanding developments in social science from the 1940s through the 1970s. The intellectual foundations of mid-century social science pre-date the Cold War and have survived its passing. Even as the adjective “Cold War” highlights the military and political framework that motivated much of the public and private funding for social science in the decades following World War II, historians might be better off understanding the social science of this period through the more blandly chronological
In the first essay, David C. Engerman’s “The Rise and Fall of Wartime Social Science: Harvard’s Refugee Interview Project, 1950-1954,” the logic of revision becomes something like a logic of disintegration. Engerman writes of how the involvement of social scientists in World War II, most notably the massive research project that became *The American Soldier* (1949-50), convinced a generation of social scientists that the behavioral sciences, “an ill-defined but ultimately well-funded amalgam of sociology, social psychology and cultural anthropology” could help solve world problems (26). The Cold War context of the postwar years made every world problem a political and military problem, and the U.S. military proved to be one of the most significant patrons, either directly or indirectly, for Cold War social science.

Engerman examines the Refugee Interview Project (with the appropriate acronym, RIP), conducted by the Russian Research Center, an offshoot of Harvard’s Department of Social Relations. Headed by Clyde Kluckhohn, a colleague of Margaret Mead and one of the leading humanist anthropologists of his day, RIP was a study of fifty thousand Displaced Persons who had fled Soviet rule to the American occupation zone following the end of the war. Sponsored by the Air Force’s Human Relations Research Institute (HRRI), the project had two main purposes: first, to understand the nature of Soviet society; second, to use this understanding to “prepare basic social-psychological guides to air attacks on the Soviet Union” (30). Much of Engerman’s account focuses on the tension between the theoretical and practical orientation of these studies. He emphasizes that this tension was not a product of the Cold War, but indeed characterized similar studies during World War II. More pointedly, he stresses that the conflict between the humanistic and instrumental aspects of the study took place as much within the military as between the military and the academy: “The Refugee Interview Project reveals the ‘academicization’ of military life as much as it does the ‘militarization’ of academic life” (31). It also seems to reveal the failure of the interdisciplinary model of social science. Congress ultimately cut off funding because the project failed to produce a “working model” of Soviet society that moved beyond social-scientific abstractions. Engerman concludes that “the complexity of interaction between scholars and their Pentagon funders” calls into question the whole notion of Cold War social science: “indeed, it is worth inquiring whether there is such a thing” (38).

It is, of course, the perennial task of revisionists to split what the previous generation has lumped or lump what the previous generation has split. As revisionists, Engerman and many of the other contributors to this collection are in one sense splitters, problematizing and complexifying the New Left interpretation of social scientists as servants of the military-industrial complex. Of course, things are always complex. The emphasis on the particular and the specific, however, risks falling into the trap of what C. Wright Mills called “crack-pot realism,” the insistence that we can draw no clear, firm conclusions until all the evidence is in—knowing full well that all the evidence will never be in, since there is always more work to be done.

Many of the essays deal with specific projects or disciplines in a way that wants to suggest that Cold War social science is a staggeringly diverse and varied phenomenon that defies generalization. At the same time, many of these also state explicitly, or show implicitly, that “it was all connected.” The quote comes from Noam Chomsky’s assessment of the intellectual ferment among Cambridge-based social scientists in the postwar period, quoted in Janet Martin-Nielsen’s essay on linguistics in the early cold war. Ranging beyond the conventional social scientific fields into disciplines such as computers, electronics and cybernetics, there was a broad faith in the possibility of science uncovering
what Joel Isaac identifies as the hidden "epistemic design," the universal structures of perception that make human beings human. The Kantian underpinnings of this project clearly pre-date—and have survived—the Cold War moment. The essays in this volume suggest that we might more fruitfully understand the Cold War as an episode in the modern, Enlightenment fashioning of an understanding of human nature than fret over the ways in which military considerations distorted an otherwise pure social science.

What understanding of the human person cuts across the variety of sub-fields and specializations of cold war social science? Hunter Heyck captures it best in his essay, "Producing Reason," in which he identifies the recurring tropes of the "limited chooser," the "bounded selector" and the "finite problem-solver" (99). Much of the debate among social scientists before, during and after the Cold War has been about how to understand the nature of the relation between freedom and constraint in the lives of individuals. Early twentieth-century sociologists valorized the group as an alternative to the anarchic individualism of laissez-faire capitalism. Cold War-era social scientists understood the rise of totalitarian political systems as a reaction against the failure of Western democracies to establish a stable, rational social order; consequently, they continued to emphasize the importance of external group structures and rational limits for ensuring political stability and unity in the face of the external threat of communism. This emphasis on the group in turn inspired a generation of left-liberal social critics to decry and denounce the "conformity" rampant in the "lonely crowd" of American society. By the 1970s, this critique led social scientists to advance a new paradigm that shifted emphasis away from the stabilizing limits of structure to "a valorization of the act of choice itself" (111). To Heyck's credit, he points out that this new consensus cut across the conventional political divide of left and right. Whereas conservatives have valorized choice in the area of (free market) economics, liberals have emphasized the freedom to choose in areas of lifestyle and culture, most especially in matters of sexuality.

In his short but symptomatic essay, Heyck covers much of the same territory as Daniel Rodgers in his recent book-length study, *Age of Fracture*. Rodgers tells a declension narrative in which the emphasis on structure over individual choice in the 1950s fostered the sense of social solidarity needed to commit to the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s; this golden age passed away due to a variety of factors, but Rodgers clearly implicates the new emphasis on freedom of choice as a key ideological factor in the fracture of intellectual and social life in America after the 1960s. Heyck seems to share Rodgers's basic narrative of change, but emphasizes the tensions and contradiction within the structure/freedom frameworks of the golden age itself. Social scientists all agreed that democracy requires free, independent and rational political actors; unfortunately, the events of the first half of the twentieth century demonstrated that individuals are not reliably rational as political actors and often choose to "escape from freedom" rather than commit to the hard work of democratic decision making. In order to preserve democracy and freedom, social scientists thus committed themselves to the "design of systems that would generate rational choices automatically" (106). For Heyck, this concern for true freedom "helps us understand how social scientists could be . . . genuinely committed to liberal democracy even as they built institutions that seemed designed to constrain people's ability to make meaningful choices" (105). This "irony" appears as a leitmotif through many of the essays in the volume.

It is time to stop seeing this relationship between democracy and social engineering as ironic. It is structurally foundational to social science itself and to the history of social science as practiced by U.S. intellectual historians. So many of the arguments advanced in the history of social science tend simply to call our attention (once again) to the tension between democracy and technocracy, and then separate the sheep (democrats) from the
goats (technocrats). At this point in the cycle of revision, we must ask ourselves what purpose this ritual of identification and judgment serves. Mark Solovey offers some clue in his introduction to the volume. In complicating the New Left critique of social-scientific complicity in the Cold War, he invokes the “flourishing of a left-leaning perspective on modernization” as a “vivid example” of how social scientists of this era were not simply tools of the military-industrial complex (14). Hamilton Cravens’s essay, “Column Right, March! Nationalism, Scientific Positivism, and the Conservative Turn of the American Social Sciences in the Cold War Era,” emphasizes the triumph of “conservative” versions of modernization theory, but only to bemoan the failure of sociology to live up to the “left-liberal perspective” of a figure like Robert Lynd, whose 1939 manifesto, Knowledge for What?, provides Cravens with a moral compass through which to navigate developments in Cold War social science (132). The contributors vary in their assessment as to whether particular social-scientific movements repressed or liberated individuals, but they all share a general sympathy for an idea of liberation based upon the vision of the human person advanced by great, left-liberal, social scientific humanists such as Robert Lynd and C. Wright Mills.

What is this vision of the human person? It is above all that of the bounded selector, understood most broadly as the free, self-creating individual whose choices are bounded by reason alone. What is reason alone? The essays in this collection suggest that Cold War social scientists engaged in a lively debate over what reason is, bounded by a rough consensus on what reason is not. As Heyck points out in his essay, social scientists had, since the early twentieth century, identified “nonrational beliefs and habits” with “religion and local cultural traditions” (101). Cravens shows how the gurus of modernization theory all agreed that economic development depended upon “psychological development,” the engineering of a certain personality type appropriate to a modern, competitive world market. Conservatives may have stressed the competitive elements of this economy, while left-liberals stressed a higher, rationalized cooperative ethic, but all agreed that development required the destruction of irrational attachments to pre-modern cooperative social structures such as family and community (128-129).

With the local, traditional and religious banished from the sphere of the rational, the boundaries between humanistic (left-liberal) and positivistic (conservative) social science proved quite fluid. Nadine Weidman’s essay on Ashley Montagu shows how previously discredited “conservative” social-scientific theories could be rehabilitated and marshaled into the service of a left-liberal political agenda. The Boasian cultural relativism popularized by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict was a powerful intellectual weapon in the fight against the scientific racism that had fueled Hitler’s genocidal anti-Semitism. By the late-nineteen forties, Montagu, himself once a leading critic of scientific racism, came to reject Boasian relativism on the grounds that it undermined the commitment to certain universal values essential to the defense of liberal democracy. Whereas Boas had argued that people are bound together in cultures by a shared pattern of values, Montagu argued that human beings are biologically hard-wired for cooperation.

Howard Brick’s contribution to the volume, “Neo-Evolutionist Anthropology, the Cold War, and the Beginnings of the World Turn in U.S. Scholarship,” similarly shows how another whipping boy of Boasian relativism, evolutionary anthropology, carried within it latent progressive tendencies. During the Victorian era, the idea of unitary cultural evolution provided justification for the domination of “advanced” European civilization over the “primitive” cultures of the non-Western world. Boasian relativism helped to undermine European cultural imperialism, but it also called into question the whole notion of human progress: if all values are relative, how can we judge advancement or improvement?
Cold War social scientists repackaged the old Victorian formulas into a new “modernization” theory that proved even more destructive than its nineteenth predecessors, but Brick sets his sights on “a counternarrative to mainstream modernization theory [that]... while framed by aspirations to progress, fostered a sharp critique of U.S. Cold War policy even before Vietnam and the antiwar movement” (156).

Culminating in the work of left-leaning anthropologists such as Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, Stanley Diamond, and Marshall Sahlins, Brick sees the emergence of a heroic alternative vision of progress, not “a kind of ‘progress’ perpetuating Euro-American domination but rather one that ‘dominated peoples’ defined for themselves” (160). On closer examination, this radical alternative would seem to be yet another manifestation of the bounded selector of mainstream liberal social science. By Brick’s own account of this alternative theory, Western contact sparked a change that could not be resisted, but native Third World peoples should be free to work out their own version of modernization inspired by “the specific social, cultural, economic, and ecological milieus already in force” (163-64). Third World peoples would make history, though not under conditions of their own making. Here Marx finds common cause with liberal Cold War humanists such as Ruth Benedict and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.[2]

Even as Brick champions the early champions of national liberation movements, he points to no clear, enduring model of national liberation. Indeed, in the work of his progressive evolutionary anthropologists, the nation itself fades into a web of global relations. In the aftermath of the tremendous dislocations of the battle between Cold War and neo-evolutionary visions of modernization, we are left with

A new sense of world connectivity [that] emphasized links, interactions, overlaps, interweavings that routinely cross boundaries of all sorts, the inextricably mutual implications of ties between what is nearby and what is far afield—all this, we now tend to presume, characterizing the world of the past no less than the world of today (167).

Brick is smart and self-aware enough to acknowledge that this happy ending could be read as itself “too much in thrall to [a] Eurocentric notion of evolution and progress” (168). This does not stop him from hoping that it might be something more. It is a hope that hangs over most of the essays in this collection, but a hope for which the essays provide no historical evidence. The years since the end of the Cold War have seen not progress so much as a continued belief in progress, a belief that social science can make the world a better place. The only thing social science has successfully made is a certain kind of person, one for whom the breathless liminality of Brick’s vision of global interconnectedness counts as man’s natural, existential state of being. The discourse of social science keeps its practitioners, elite and popular, in a perpetual state of detachment from those original sworn enemies of reason, “religion and local cultural traditions.” Walt Whitman Rostow is no doubt smiling up at us now.

____________________
[1]Mark Solovey, “Cold War Social Science:  Specter, Reality, or Useful Concept?, in Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens, eds. Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 16. All subsequent page references to this essay and other essays from this collection will be in parentheses following the quote or paraphrase.


Christopher Shannon is associate professor of history at Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia. He teaches courses in Western Civilization, U.S. History and Historiography. He is the author of two works in U.S. Intellectual History: {Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual and Culture in Modern American Social Thought} and {A World Made Safe for Differences: Cold War Intellectuals and the Politics of Identity}.

This entry was posted in {USIH Blog, C. Wright Mills, Christopher Shannon, Cold War, Hamilton Cravens, history of social science, Mark Solovey} by L.D. Burnett. Bookmark the {permalink [http://s-usih.org/2012/07/review-shannon-on-cold-war-social.html]}.

4 THOUGHTS ON “REVIEW: SHANNON ON "COLD WAR SOCIAL SCIENCE"”

1. howie berman on July 20, 2012 at 8:16 pm said:

This is just a thought equally applicable to contemporary politics and as well to contemporary social science; in chess, you have to checkmate the enemy King while also taking pains to protect your own King.

Mid century social science tried too hard to checkmate enormous social problems while neglecting to defend society from flareups from those problems or from unintended consequences.

The liberals attack social problems; conservatives (in theory) defend society by preserving essential institutions and arrangements. Ideally the two sides should be united in a fecund tension so that social problems are checkmated while society itself isn’t checkmated or (and the analogy here may stretch) stalemate too is avoided. Our current predicament I surmise is a kind of stalemate, a kind of uneasy status quo.

I am less familiar with the relevant literature than many; but this is how things seem

Chris Shannon on July 24, 2012 at 2:32 pm said:

Howie,

Thank you for taking the time to respond to my review. To continue with your chess analogy, I would say that the King remains quite well protected—the King
being modernity understood as a rejection of the local and traditional. Liberals and conservatives are on the same team. Even as their own intra-modern squabbles have reached a stalemate—our politics and culture swing mildly back and forth across a fairly narrow spectrum, a little more market at one time, a little more state at another—this low level civil war, really a family feud, continues to squeeze out the space in which local traditions can flourish. This is the true “work” of social science.

–Chris

2. Howard Berman on July 24, 2012 at 9:26 pm said:

Thank you for appreciating my chess analogy. Am I mistaken to understand your position in favor of the local as strengthening the individual? The irony being that modernity was supposed to enhance the individual; while in fact, outside of a community we are buffeted by large impersonal forces at play. I’m sure there is much discussion of this in the literature

Chris Shannon on July 25, 2012 at 2:30 pm said:

Howie,

Yes, in a sense, this is a misread of my position. In part, the issue is terminology, but the difference is more than semantic. The local, as liberal/conservative/radical moderns have long argued, does indeed weaken the individual by imposing restrictions and limiting options. Modernization theorists of various political stripes were all dedicated to liberating the individual by removing traditional, local constraints. Such theorists conventionally associate tradition with repression and modernity with liberation. I think the historical
record belies the conceit of this formulation, even if one accepts modernity’s understanding of liberation. Many of the contributors to the volume acknowledge the embarrassment that modernizers today feel when looking back on a Walt Rostow who saw the carpet bombing of Vietnamese peasants as ultimately part of their emancipation from “the idiocy of rural life”—a characterization of traditional society shared by liberals and radicals alike, along with pro-capitalist conservatives.

My critique is a defense not of the individual, but of the person, an understanding of the self as rooted in community. I have no illusions about any pre-modern communal utopias, but neither do I have any illusions about modern/postmodern utopias. The debate here is between two understandings of what it means to be human, and the two understandings cannot be judged by some neutral (usually material) standard. I do believe, however, that there are points of contact that offer hope for a common understanding. The doomsday rhetoric of global warming aside, the environmental movement is the most compelling modern recognition of the need for limits, a need long recognized in traditional societies. Of course, most modern environmentalists seem to respect every kind of nature except human nature, which they believe to be open to all the creatively destructive possibilities that modern technology will allow. On this matter, social science will be of little help.