BOOK REVIEWS


“We need to follow the money,” Mark Solovey argues, “in order to understand what gets studied, by whom, how, under what conditions, and for what purposes” (p. 203). He sets this task for himself in explaining the “politics-patronage-social science nexus” from 1945 to roughly 1960. Specifically, he examines how the interaction of political currents and actual or potential sources of funding shaped the production of social science during these years. Four cases are explored in considerable detail: the failed efforts to incorporate social science in the original plan of the National Science Foundation (NSF); military support for social science research; the aborted Behavioral Science Program (BSP) of the new Ford Foundation (1951–1957); and the treatment of the social sciences in the NSF after its establishment.

These episodes focus on persistent “challenges” faced by the social sciences. They were consistently treated condescendingly, if not disparagingly, by the natural science establishment. Thus, their claims to be included in the NSF were initially dismissed. However, the author might have noted that the natural sciences were struggling for federal recognition themselves in the prolonged battle to launch the foundation, and the social sciences lost little besides pride since the early NSF had hardly any funds to disburse. Since they were not explicitly excluded, the social sciences entered the back door during the 1950s. The price was adopting rigorous scientism, as NSF would only fund research that was “objective, verifiable, and generalizable”—and avoiding controversial topics. This was constraining, as Solovey emphasizes, but not a terrible mandate for young sciences with a credibility problem.

While the NSF insisted on basic social science with no applications, the military invested extensively in research that could be applied, which the author calls “social engineering.” The impetus for such research flowed directly from wartime research, but soon was motivated chiefly by the Cold War. A good deal of it was conducted by the RAND Corporation, created by the Air Force, and other special units, but some also involved academic social scientists and, particularly, influential figures who straddled both realms. Defense funding developed fields of communications (propaganda), operations research, systems theory, game theory, and strategy science. It was highly scientistic, since its intent was to deliver predictive and operational results. After 1960, aspects of this research began to be criticized for unrealistic assumptions and dangerous conclusions. However, it created a large legacy of Cold War social and psychological science.

The NSF and Defense Establishment pursued clear missions, but at the Ford Foundation the more amorphous goals of the BSP were warped by politics. The Ford Foundation was a social enterprise of unprecedented size, launched during the height of McCarthyite hysteria. Its conservative board was inherently wary of possible links with liberal causes. However, they were further intimidated by Congressional investigations that linked the behavioral sciences, no matter how implausibly, with nefarious left-wing associations. Under these conditions, the BSP could scarcely broach controversial topics, including race, sex, religion, or politics. This study thus documents how Cold War politics restricted the purview of postwar social science. But here rivalry with the Soviet Union was not the driving force; anticommunism served as a screen for native reactionary opposition to New Deal legacies, and any and all threats to
segregation. The BSP’s original mission of building capacity in the social sciences was largely abandoned in favor of support for eminent, safe investigators and uncontroversial applied projects.

Solovey provides an exhaustively detailed and documented description of the postwar travails of American social science. Future inquiry into the origins of these disciplines will benefit from the material and analysis. However, the volume presents a somewhat narrow view. There is little discussion of the content of the social sciences and its development over these years: methodological advancement to support scientistic approaches or abstract concepts developed to address social phenomena in apolitical terms. Nor is there any discussion of social science in the universities—the recipients of much of the patronage at issue.

To this reader, the author pushes his theses a bit too far. After Sputnik, the climate for research rapidly improved, for social as well as natural sciences. In 1961, the social sciences were given their own division in NSF. Scientistic or not, they were now inside the scientific establishment. Solovey maintains that the same challenges persisted; but now the condescending attitudes of natural scientists were hardly an impediment. Arguments about scientific objectivity versus research infused with social values continued internally, but such issues no longer were fodder for external criticism. Most salient, the social sciences were now solidly grounded in the nation’s research universities, on the cusp of spectacular growth and prosperity. If the author had “followed the money” into the social science departments of research universities, he would have found investigators employing such patronage to establish centers, perform research, and train legions of doctoral students—to establish, in sum, solid grounding for the prodigious expansion of the 1960s, rather than “shaky foundations.”

Reviewed by ROGER L. GEIGER, Distinguished Professor of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University