Shaky Foundations: The Politics–Patronage–Social Science Nexus in Cold War America

Mark Solovey. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013. x, 253 pp. $39.95.)

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The eighth volume to appear in the series Studies in Modern Science, Technology, and the Environment (edited by Mark A. Largent), *Shaky Foundations* is a well-researched account of the rise of a new patronage system for the social sciences in the early Cold War–era United States. Case studies of three patronage-based relationships—the National Science Foundation (*NSF*), the military science establishment, and the Ford Foundation—form the heart of this book.

After examining the social sciences and their place in national science policy after World War II, Mark Solovey examines the hesitant growth of the *NSF* until the 1957 launch of *Sputnik*, the slow development of a military–social science partnership, and the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program (*BSP*), which became the most significant patron of the social and behavioral sciences in the 1950s. The *BSP* made 373 grants, totaling nearly $43 million, yet conservative opposition during the McCarthy era became so fierce that the Ford Foundation could neither fund a new edition of the fifteen-volume *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences nor*, after the Rockefeller Foundation ended its relationship with Alfred Kinsey, support the popular sexologist’s research into human sexual behavior.

Criticism of social science efforts to link with the natural sciences came early from scientists and later from liberal scholars who feared that those pursuing value–free research risked being co–opted by the establishment. In nearly every instance those operating within the patronage system understood the social sciences to be junior partners to natural science—a skewed relationship that largely determined the allocation of research grants from the *NSF* and the growing military establishment, which responded minimally until John F. Kennedy became president. Each funding agency had interests that at times caused contention, but the dominant, enduring challenge to policy–oriented research came from conservatives who detected leftist biases in the patronage system and frequently confused social science with socialism. That the Ford Foundation was the world’s wealthiest philanthropic body offered little protection.


There are gaps in Solovey’s study. “Scientism,” used nonpejoratively to characterize methods that are “rigorous, systematic, and quantitative,” is a key theme, yet readers are left wondering about the scope of value judgments that are inevitable even in the work of “scientistic” social scientists (p. 4). How closely did they approximate the standards of objectivity, verifiability, and generality? The *BSP*, shut down in 1957, was enormously successful, readers are told—but not how that was so. Nevertheless, after working through the complex relationships among social scientists and patrons, politicians and program managers—all of whom operated amid national needs—Solovey leaves readers with a sharpened understanding of the travails of social science research during the first two decades of the Cold War.

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