Clearing the Ground for New Beginnings

Here’s the latest of our Book Reviews—one that should have been posted a while back but is now up for discussion. Timothy Glander is a professor in the Department of the Social and Psychological Foundations of Education at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York.—Robert Greene II

A review by Timothy Glander

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

By Mark Solovey


Just now, among social scientists, there is a widespread uneasiness, both intellectual and moral, about the direction their chosen studies seem to be taking. This uneasiness, as well as the unfortunate tendencies that contribute to it, are, I suppose, part of a general malaise of contemporary intellectual life. Yet perhaps the uneasiness is more acute among social scientists, if only because of the larger promise that has guided much earlier work in their fields, the nature of the subjects with which they deal, and the urgent need for significant work today.

Not everyone shares this uneasiness, but the fact that many do not is itself a cause for further uneasiness among those who are alert to the promise and honest enough to admit the pretentious mediocrity of much current effort. It is, quite frankly, my hope to increase this uneasiness, to define some of its sources, to help transform it into a specific urge to realize the promise of social science, to clear the ground for new beginnings: in short, to indicate some of the tasks at hand and the means available for doing the work that must be done.

-C. Wright Mills, 1959 [1]

In this passage, C. Wright Mills expresses key themes of his widely acclaimed mid-century critique of American sociology. Here was Mills, arguably the most widely read sociologist in the world at the time of his death in 1962, making the case for a meaningful and relevant sociology by reclaiming “the promise” of the classic social science traditions. Here was Mills, who was so marginalized in the field that he found it difficult to secure funding for his research, advocating for the development of a “sociological imagination” that would enable people to connect biography and history, psychology and social structure, in the service of confronting and attending to the real personal troubles and social problems in which they were engulfed. Here was Mills, who saw sociology driven by two prevalent forms of obscurantism (abstracted empiricism and grand theory), hoping to increase the “uneasiness” of conscientious sociologists by throwing light on some of the forces corrupting the human sciences at mid-century. Mills lacked historical distance and perspective, however, and thus was unable to flesh out a full picture of what was happening. But he was sensitive to the major trends and tendencies.[2] It became the responsibility of later scholars to continue the task of drawing a more complete and comprehensive picture of the historical context shaping the social sciences during this period.

Mark Solovey’s important new book, Shaky Foundations, might be seen as consistent with this effort. The multiple meanings of the title are reflective of the uneasiness among some social scientists that Mills
noted. One literal meaning, which drives the main focus of his research and analysis, concerns the political (read: ambiguous, uncertain, marginal) place of the social sciences in Cold War America, especially at the fledgling (though massive) Ford and National Science Foundations. Another meaning refers more broadly to the insecure (read: soft, artificial, hollow) substructure upon which the edifice of our inherited human sciences has been built. In attending primarily to the first of these meanings, Solovey has provided an insightful account of some of the cultural and political forces shaping the social sciences during a time of their dramatic growth. His focus is on the political dynamics involving a few dominant sources of funding for the social sciences, including military and national security organizations as well as the aforementioned foundations.

This is new terrain, and his carefully researched and well written narrative, makes a significant contribution to the emerging body of historical scholarship in this area. And while he does not deal extensively with the secondary meaning of book’s title, Solovey’s work helps to provide a context from which one might pose and pursue questions about state of the human sciences today. His book enables, in other words, a vantage point from which to ask about the status of “the promise” of the social sciences to which Mills referred and was committed.

Solovey’s argument is clearly articulated in his introductory chapter and premised on three related and overlapping claims about key extra-university social science funding sources in the period immediately following World War II. Most obviously, he identifies the emergence and impact of new social science research patrons, namely the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program (BSP), and the multiple and massive military organizations and intelligence agencies, which came to dominate cultural life in Cold War America. He is quick to point out that foundation funding of social science research predates World War II, as evidenced by the significant pre-war funding of the social sciences by, most notably, the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations. Moreover, he notes that the military and intelligence funding of the social sciences during the Cold War was, in part, an extension of funding that took place during World War II. Solovey argues, however, that much hung the balance at the end of World War II, and during a time of deep uncertainty and debate about the nature and role of the social sciences, these new and greatly expanded funding sources were able to assert significant influence. While these patrons did not operate through a means of centralized control, Solovey does identify a kind of “informal coordination” that existed among them and which tended to endorse a particular orientation for the social sciences.

This orientation, which constitutes Solovey’s second major claim, was reflected in the prevalence and dominance of scientism among the social sciences, as well as their frequently explicit social engineering purposes. This is a basic, yet important, point and it is amply demonstrated by the evidence that he marshals in subsequent chapters. It is also a source of systemic contradiction to which Solovey returns again and again. The major thrust of American social sciences at mid-century can be found in its utilitarian and applied character, its emphasis on social engineering and social control, as well as its deliberate attempt to be construed as value-free. The social sciences were to be seen as congruent and continuous with a larger scientific enterprise. They were to ape the methodological and epistemological assumptions of the physical and natural sciences by pursuing a narrow and largely quantitative empiricism. They were to appear to be pursuing a value-neutral, objective, scientific inquiry, even as they were involved in the development of applied means of social control. Solovey leaves unexplored the question of the degree to which the social sciences created effective applied techniques, nor does he investigate some of the uses to which such social science technique may have been put. Moreover, while he recognizes that “scientism” generally has had pejorative connotations, he desires to remain above the fray and uses the term descriptively and analytically rather than normatively. Nevertheless, Solovey’s claim that social science patrons were committed to scientism and social engineering is central to understanding how social science knowledge was socially constructed during this period. Again, the contradiction to be found among efforts toward value-neutrality and practical application is at the heart of the matter and serves as a recurring theme of Solovey’s narrative.

The third claim upon which his argument is based concerns the criticism and obstacles this scientific and social engineering orientation generated among conservative and liberal political interests and among some
segments of the social science community itself. Solovey identifies five such obstacles/criticisms, which he argues significantly shaped the way the social sciences were manifested in the Cold War period and which subsequently influenced further critique in the 1960s and 1970s. These include: 1) a conservative political critique of patron funding, which had the contradictory effect of increasing the movement toward the alleged value-neutrality of the social sciences even as it recognized that such efforts undercut traditional social values; 2) a critique among political liberals who saw the allegiance toward value-neutrality as diminishing the progressive and reform-minded spirit prevalent especially in the 1930s; 3) a critique, cutting across the political spectrum, that regarded patron influence to be an assault on scholarly quality and independence; 4) the entrenchment of a second-class status of the social sciences despite the movement by patrons to conceptualize the social sciences as representing a continuation and unity with the physical and natural sciences; and 5) the recognition that some patron supported research was clearly ideologically and politically driven despite attempts to define them as value-neutral and as strictly scientifically objective.

In subsequent chapters, Solovey investigates the impact of these obstacles/criticisms on the political dynamics of the social sciences at the NSF, the military science establishment, and the Ford Foundation’s BSP. He explores the debates surrounding the establishment of the NSF, particularly those that pitted liberal democratic West Virginia senator Harley Kilgore against the more influential position of conservative Vannevar Bush. Bush, an MIT engineering dean and vice president and key NSF architect, argued that the new federal science agency must be free from political control, and was, for the most part, antagonistic to NSF support of the social sciences. Social scientists responded, in part, by further adopting a scientistic orientation, though the status of the social sciences would remain tenuous at this massive new agency and in the shadows of the natural and physical sciences.

Similarly, Solovey explores the dynamics and controversies surrounding the patronage of the social sciences by military and intelligence agencies and finds that here, too, Cold War politics shaped the contours the social sciences came to hold. While some more liberal social scientists (most notably Robert Lynd) questioned military sponsored social science research, most social scientists were only too willing to take their place at the funding trough. Right wing, anti-communist, fears and rhetoric, however, again compelled social scientists to lower their profile and to assume a more value-neutral posture. Solovey focuses his analysis on three “social sciences weapons of war:” communication studies, the decision sciences, and an emerging field which he labels the “science of strategy.” But he also accurately recognizes that the military was the largest patron of the field of psychology during the Cold War, a fact that unfortunately is not part of the historical consciousness of most contemporary psychologists. The multiple military organizations, intelligence agencies, and national security departments operating at that time represent a complex web of overlapping funding activities, much of which were classified at various levels of secrecy. Solovey provides an important service in untangling and making sense of some of this complicated web, and, in so doing, will greatly facilitate the work of scholars who follow in his footsteps.

The story of the rise and dénouement of the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program follows a similar political analysis and is treated with particular insight. The BSP, led by Bernard Berelson from 1951 until its closure in 1957, was especially influential in funding university-based social science research. The BSP also sought to fund social research modeled on the physical and natural sciences, and according to its early planning documents aimed to support “basic” social science research. Yet following internal and external tensions, it too opted to concentrate its funding on more applied social science research. As Solovey notes, much of this research overlapped with the kinds of work being funded by the military establishment, which is not surprising given that many of the BSP’s advisers and funding recipients were heavily involved in concurrent military and intelligence related work. The BSP strategy was to fund the most prestigious social science research academic units (most notably Stanford University’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences) as a way of setting the direction and agenda for social science research, as well as legitimating the nature of the work conducted by these units. Despite its significant impact on the social science research at mid-century, the BSP, as a wing of the nation’s largest foundation, was the target of increasing conservative fears and congressional investigations on the political and cultural influence of private foundations. Again, Solovey’s analysis suggests that the
applied and scientific approach supported by the BSP was, at least in part, the lightning rod for criticism of the BSP and the social sciences more generally.

Solovey successfully describes the political context and dynamics impacting the social sciences at mid-century, and reveals how social scientists responded to various political attacks and obstacles sometimes effectively, but frequently in a way that left their work open to further criticism and marginalization. As to be expected in a work of this scope, there are some aspects of this political context which are left unexplored. Indeed, given the relatively recent nature of this context, as well as the still highly classified nature of some of the research conducted for the national security apparatus, this is not at all surprising. We know, for instance, that Air Force established the Human Resources Research Institute (HRRI) in 1949 and began funding major social science research programs at University of Washington, University of Illinois, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, University of Southern California, Harvard University, Columbia University, the Educational Testing Service, and others. We know, too, that HRRI was disbanded during the 1953-1954 academic year following a congressional investigation, and that some of the programs initially contracted through HRRI were continued by the CIA through its front organization, The Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology, long after HRRI’s operations were discontinued.[3] Yet we know little of the full scope of this work, nor do we have a complete understanding of its impact on our inherited social sciences. The Cold War practice of establishing secretive front organizations to conceal the source of funding for controversial research remains a special challenge for contemporary historians of the social sciences, and the classified nature of this work remains an obstacle to our full understanding. Thus, despite its great contribution, Solovey’s account must be understood to be partial and tentative at best.

A more significant problem concerns Solovey’s decision to not critically engage the meaning of “scientism” (or, for that matter, to not interrogate the ethics of the applied social research dominant in the period.) In his introduction he attempts to clarify his use of the term “scientism” and reveals to the reader he personally believes that “many types of worthwhile social science inquiry do differ in basic respects from natural-science inquiry.” (p. 17). He tells the reader, however, that his purposes are descriptive and analytical rather than prescriptive, and that his use of the term abjures its typical pejorative connotations. While this might seem like a laudable approach to take (and one might applaud the consistency with which he adheres to it), such an approach unnecessarily limits an understanding of the political dynamics at work for at least two basic reasons. First, as an intellectual culture we are well beyond the point of simply accepting claims that social inquiry can be value-neutral, that it can ever commence from a blank, presuppositionless mind.[4] Indeed, social inquiry is always premised on an explicit or implicit metaphysic or ideology, a set of assumptions (albeit often unexamined) about the nature of human being, what constitutes a good society, the nature of truth and so on. An important focus of a history that treats the emergence of a social science dominated by scientism, therefore, ought to treat scientism as an ideology in its own right, to critically investigate its underlying assumptions and values, and to make these assumptions and values explicit. Secondly, insofar as the claims of value neutrality were deliberately made by social scientists and their patrons in order deflect criticism of their work, it is important to interpret scientism as a mask for ideology. Here the goal would not be to treat the ideology of scientism at face value, but to critically examine the way it was used to shield critique of what may be understood to be an intentionally hidden ideology. Here, again, fleshing out the underlying assumptions of this hidden ideology and making them explicit would yield a much richer story of what took place. Solovey’s preliminary analysis would seem to provide early spadework for such an effort as he highlights the critiques of scientism from both the left and right wings of the political spectrum.

Solovey’s new book, then, can be seen as an important step toward clearing “the ground for new beginnings.” By sifting through the rubble he has identified the remnants of an orientation to the human sciences heavily shaped by the politics and culture of the Cold War. That we have unreflectively inherited much of this grim orientation, as well as many of the institutional values and practices of this period, should be a cause of considerable uneasiness. But sifting through the rubble can be an occasion for genuine hope as well. Scattered here one can also find expressions of the human sciences more fully reflective of their authentic promise. It is with this work that we may begin to establish more sturdy foundations for the scientific study of human being.[5]
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