Regional Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cres20

What Regional Studies Might Have Been: Cold War American Social Science
Trevor Barnes

Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~tbarnes/

To cite this article: Trevor Barnes (2013): What Regional Studies Might Have Been: Cold War American Social Science, Regional Studies, 47:3, 461-464
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2013.767997

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
What Regional Studies Might Have Been: Cold War American Social Science

TREVOR BARNES
Department of Geography, 1984 West Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada.
http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~tbarnes/


This journal, and the larger Regional Studies Association that underwrites it, are cases of a Cold War road not taken. Things could have turned out quite differently, however. The Cold War, as Mark Solovey and Hamilton Craven’s excellent new edited collection demonstrates, profoundly shaped and changed American social science. During the early post-war period social science first took on many of the features that were to characterize it during the second half of the twentieth century, and which have continued into the new millennium: aspiring to the universal, eschewing the local context and striving for general methods capable of yielding objective scientific truths.

None of these features came to define the Regional Studies Association, but it was touch and go especially at the beginning. The Regional Studies Association’s ostensible North American double, the Regional Science Association, had been inaugurated in 1955, ten years before Regional Studies. Emerging fully formed, Athena-like, in this case from the forehead of the economist Walter Isard, Regional Science from the start was a full-blooded Cold War social science trading in all the features that define the larger genus. Under that remit Isard came to the London School of Economics (LSE) in July 1964 to persuade British regional economists, economic geographers and planners to be pukka regional scientists (BARNES, 2004, pp. 119–120). A committee was struck, but rather than becoming the British section of the Regional Science Association as Isard hoped, an entirely new organization was created, the Regional Studies Association. The justification put forward by the early founders of Regional Studies for staying separate was that Regional Science was unable to represent the peculiarities of the British and European situation. At the critical committee meeting where the decision to go along was made, one of the members, Peter Self, said that compared with Regional Science, Regional Studies would be ‘more modest’ and offer ‘a more distinctive approach … [that] would follow its own line’.1 It has.

In contrast, as many of the essays collected in this book demonstrate, there was nothing modest about American Cold War social science. It had more practitioners, produced more publications and was more influential than any other extant national brand of social science (pp. 1–2). It was also defined by an expansionary impulse, to go global, and the corollary to push aside and replace any local tradition that blocked it. That is of course what Isard was doing when he tried to set up a branch plant of regional science at the LSE in 1964.

Also immodest were the goals of American Cold War social science which were grand and extravagant: to define human nature, to bring democracy everywhere to the world, to speak the absolute Truth, to win the Cold War. There was a belief that all this was possible if only social scientists carried out the right kind of social science. The right kind involved unstinting rigour, developing general theory and models, using cutting-edge analytical techniques and technology, deploying team-based, preferably multidisciplinary, researchers, spending large sums of money, and aligning social science’s interests with those of the state and business (producing what Senator William Fulbright later dubbed ‘the military–industrial–academic complex’; KAY, 2000, pp. 10–11). Ultimately,
inspiration and justification for such an approach came from the Second World War. Then similar strategies involving teamwork, throwing large sums of money at a problem, ‘mangling’ institutional structures (Picker- ing, 1995), and practising formal modelling were first developed and tried out both in the physical sciences (the Manhattan Project was the most spectacular example; Goueff, 1967) and in the social sciences (perhaps best represented by the work carried out at the Office of Strategic Services’ Research and Analysis Branch; Katz, 1989). If those strategies could win the Second World War, they might win the Cold War too. That was the thinking.

Cold War Social Science is a book about how a specific historical, social, political and geographical setting – the Cold War – entered into the very bones of the American social science project. And what was bred in the bone came out in the marrow. The term ‘Cold War’ was coined by the American journalist Walter Lippmann in 1947 to describe the fragile ‘armed peace’ that held between the two antagonistic superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and which became even more fragile when the Soviet Union got ‘the bomb’ two years later in 1949. While the Cold War was initially treated as the explanandum, the object to be explained, over the last thirty years a burgeoning academic literature has increasingly treated it as the explanans (Isaac and Bell, 2012, p. 1). An ever-lengthening list of topics relating to American life during the early post–war period has been put in conversation with, if not explanatorily reduced to, the Cold War. While that list includes the obvious, American diplomatic policy and US geopolitical manoeuvring, and the only slightly less obvious, technological developments stemming from the pervasive militarization of ‘Camp America’ (especially computerization; Akere 2007), there are other subjects given the Cold War treatment that on the surface appear more remote: social movements, household reproduction, gender relations, urban form, regional planning and, especially germane to the book under review, academic knowledge.

Under the rationalist rendering, academic knowledge is unadulterated, innocent, the distillate of pure reason. But that is not the view of the contributors to this book. All advance a contextual approach that contends that academic knowledge (the explanandum) is shaped and marked by its historical and geographical setting, the Cold War (the explanans). As Mark Solovey points out in his useful Introduction, contextual explanation is tricky, however (pp. 4–6). First, one has to delineate the right context, in this case, to define the precise nature of the Cold War and its constituent parts. Once that is worked out, just as difficult is figuring which bits of that context matter and how, and equally hard, which bits do not matter even though on first blush they appear as if they might. Getting contextual explanation right, and the majority of the chapters get it right, involves considerable intellectual agility: to move within a paragraph, sometimes within a single sentence, from high-level generalization to concrete and mundane fact, from a thrilling theorist to a dry-as-dust archive, from a bucolic Harvard Yard to a desolate and scarred Soviet nuclear test site in Kazakhstan.

The book is divided into three substantive sections. The first, ‘Knowledge Production’, puts the intellectual agility of contributors on full display, and no more so than the opening chapter, David Engerman’s ‘The Rise and Fall of Wartime Social Science: Harvard’s Refugee Interview Project, 1950–54’. The project involved interviewing large numbers of Soviet ‘Displaced Persons’ who ended up in America after the war, and using the resulting questionnaire results to construct an empirically robust ‘working model’ of contemporary Soviet society. That model was to be used by American military intelligence to identify and exploit Soviet socio-structural weaknesses: counterinsurgency by a general model. As a project it had all the hallmarks of Cold War social science: an enormous budget (US$11 million in 2011 prices) provided by the US Air Force; a large team of multidisciplinary researchers (sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians and economists); an overarching general theory based on Harvard’s own Talcott Parson’s structural functionalism geared towards understanding conditions of social stability; the ‘mangling’ of institutions, in this case government, the military and the academy; and an extreme belief in the propitious power of social science, in this case, to cure the Soviet Union of evil. Inevitably it did not go quite to plan. On the one hand, the US military and its handlers had problems with the idea that theory could be a weapon, even with the notion of a ‘model’ (one overseeing congressman asked if it was like a ‘model train or airplane’; p. 35). On the other hand, the academics who did the researching thought they were prostituting their scholarship; the military having ‘bought a piece of Harvard University’ (quoted on p. 35). But while it was crudely done, the project was a start, establishing a larger template and role for the social sciences, particularly their prominence at Harvard (brilliantly discussed by Isaac, 2012).

The other three papers in this section fill out and advance this epistemological story. Kaya Talon’s ‘Future Studies’ examines the futurist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These were not based on astrological readings, though, but recondite mathematical projections derived from statistical analysis of large time-series datasets. Also under this wider rubric went imagining possible future worlds, each the consequence of making a different assumption about a key statistical variable. Those variables were then inserted into various theoretical models (game theory was a favourite), and the hulking mainframe computer did the rest. It spat out futurist outcomes as varied as nuclear apocalypse (a frequent end of the model runs at RAND, the US military’s favourite non–profit ‘think tank’), or, just
as bad, Malthusian annihilation as in one of Herman Khan’s Hudson Institute futurist scenarios. Janet Martin-Nielsen’s outstanding essay ‘It Was All Connected’ links Cold War computerization with linguistics. The dean of modern linguistics, and also an iconic anti-Cold War warrior, Noam Chomsky coined the phrase that forms Martin-Nielsen’s chapter title. But her use of it is ironic. Her argument is that although Chomsky may have said ‘it was all connected’, his account of the modern history of linguistics left out the crucial part played by computers. For Martin-Nielsen, though, computers were fundamental, linking the development of linguistics to the Cold War. Indeed, and a second irony, it was precisely Chomsky’s path-breaking formulation of linguistics as a mathematical science during the 1950s that enabled the connection to computers in the first place. After his formulation, large sums of military money went into joining computerization with linguistics to achieve both theoretical and practical ends (developing machine-based language translations were especially important). The last chapter in the section is Joel Isaac’s ‘Epistemic Design’. It is about another Harvard Cold War endeavour, maybe the best known: the attempt to produce a general theory of action uniting the social sciences, and associated with Talcott Parsons at the Department of Social Relations. The epistemological problem for this project was to ‘render … data collected in piecemeal or ad hoc research projects’ (p. 82) in a form that ‘transcended the bare inscription of a single set of affairs’ (p. 88). This could be done, according to Isaac, by scrupulous attention to ‘epistemic design’, which meant ensuring that the data were always recorded within the terms of the conceptual scheme that lay beneath the general theory deployed. ‘The scheme–content dualism … [was] another singular feature of the Cold War social sciences’, Isaac concludes (p. 92).

The second section of the book is about ‘Liberal Democracy’. After all, Cold War America trumpeted itself as the bastion of the ‘Free World’ against an authoritarian, rigid and anti-democratic Soviet Union. At first, most American social scientists more or less supported that line, although their positions were not straightforward, and later there was increasing dissent. The first chapter, Hunter Heyek’s ‘Producing Reason’, is about the complexities of realizing any kind of democracy. A problem, Heyek argues, was raised by a long-standing American social scientific tradition that culminated in the 1950s, and exemplified by Herbert Simon’s work, which showed that individuals often make irrational choices, and that those choices can be so irrational they undermine the democratic system that allowed them. Large sums of Cold War research money were consequently devoted to providing a solution primarily by designing technical systems that constrained individuals so much they could make only ‘good’ choices. The paradox, of course, was that democratic disaster was averted by anti-democratic means. Other kinds of paradoxes are raised in Hamilton Cravens’ ‘Column Right, March!’ Providing a sweeping history of American social sciences from the Second World War to the end of the 1980s, Cravens is struck by the slide from its liberal, democratic and socially progressive aspirations at the start of its period, to what it became by its end: an ‘alliance forged … between … a superpower, militarized, and thermonuclear armed patriotism and social science that bid fare to create a “Pax Americana” around the world’ (p. 132). Joy Rohde’s excellent ‘From Expert Democracy to Beltway Banditry’ perfectly exemplifies that moral drift. Her case study is the Special Operations Research Office (SORO). Created in 1956, employing civilian experts based at the American University, Washington, DC, SORO began with high-minded ends: to provide the Army with social scientific knowledge so it can be ‘a direct, positive instrument in human progress’ (quoted on p. 138). But, and we all know this is coming, SORO quickly slips, its social scientific advice turning out to be an instrument of regressive consequences; its experts in democracy turning out to be ‘Beltway Bandits’. In a bleak happy ending, SORO is expelled from the campus in 1969 following student protests. But it was not only students who protested. Some professors did too, and taken up in Howard Brick’s terrific chapter entitled ‘Neo-Evolutionist Anthropology’. It is a richly drawn essay (as so many of the chapters are in this collection). The gist is that against the crude modernization thesis that directed American Cold War policies towards the Global South (and stemming from the formulations of such Cold War social scientists as Parsons and Walt Rostow), a series of left-wing neo-evolutionary anthropologists offered a radical alternative. It was that countries should establish their own criteria of modernization and progress; that they be understood on their own terms rather than those of Western Europe and North America; and that they become people with a history.

The final section is about ‘Human Nature’. If US social science could find the secret of being human, that knowledge could be used both as a benefit, to solidify and strengthen Cold War American society, and as a weapon, to subvert the other side. Edward Jones-Inhotep’s ‘Managing Humans’ leads off. It is a virtuoso discussion joining Cold War psychology with Cold War machines (which otherwise generally get short-shift in the collection). Machines of all kinds constituted the Cold War. But if mistakes were made in using at least some of them, the result might be the end of the world as we knew it (‘Nuclear war can ruin your whole weekend,’ as bumper stickers had it). Consequently, Jones-Inhotep argues, Cold War technicians, the principal operators of those machines were, in Foucauldian fashion, re-made to become more reliable subjects. Potentially catastrophic outcomes were reduced by making technicians machine-like and less human. Mike Bycroft’s ‘Psychology, Psychologists, and the
Creativity Movement’ that follows is about Cold War techniques to locate and elicit human creativity. Clearly, any side that could up its ante of scientific, if not social, scientific geniuses had an advantage. Nadine’s Weidman’s chapter entitled ‘An Anthropologist on TV’ is about one genius in particular: the former Rutgers anthropologist Ashley Montagu. But after the House Committee on Un-American activities got done with him, believing his assertion that human nature was essentially cooperative, having him on the American side did not seem quite such an advantage. Montagu was forced to resign from Rutgers, but he fought back. He used the new cultural medium of television to speak especially to female viewers to support his anti-Cold War arguments based on a cooperative human nature. The last chapter by Marga Vicedo, ‘Cold War Emotions’, traces another theory of human nature used both to bolster Cold War American social efforts and to cast aspersions on the Soviet system. The theory was that mother-love, the dyad between mother and child, provided fundamental emotional maturity for offspring, which then translated into a larger stable social democratic order. The theory became embodied in the post-War American suburban ideal, with stay-at-home mothers carrying out childcare (fostering mother-love) and fathers sustaining that relation by bringing back a Fordist wage. In the Soviet Union, though, mothers worked, and childcare was communal. It was another reason why the Soviet system would fail and America would be triumphant.

Cold War Social Science is a formidable collection marked by impeccable scholarship, compelling argument, limpid prose, original ideas and continuing relevance. The Cold War might have ended more than twenty years ago, but its shadow has been long. The Cold War years were the crucible in which the contemporary form of many American social sciences was forged. Those years, I would suggest, came to define what American social science is now expected to be: rigorous, theoretical, empirically exact, and aspiring to objectivity and truth. Of course, it was not all smooth sailing. There was contestation along the way, and especially American human geography took an unexpected turn. From the mid-1950s it appeared on track to be just like any other American social science, having experienced the ‘quantitative revolution’ during the early 1960s. It was all set to enter the Cold War social science pantheon (Barnes, 2008). But something happened during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the expected trajectory was never fulfilled. In retrospect, the rejection of regional science by the regional studies committee in 1965 was a kind of prefiguring event. Clearly, other imperatives became relevant for American human geography, weakening the grip of the earlier Cold War impress. Consequently, a different contextual history will need to be written for American human geography, but adhering to the contextual historical approach and high intellectual standards of this volume.

NOTE


REFERENCES


