BOOK REVIEW:

“SOCIAL SCIENCE FOR WHAT? BATTLES OVER PUBLIC FUNDING FOR THE "OTHER SCIENCES" AT THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION” BY MARK SOLOVEY

REVIEWED BY

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Review of *Social Science for What? Battles over Public Funding for the "Other Sciences" at the National Science Foundation*. Mark Solovey. 2020. ISBN: 9780262539050

At the core of Mark Solovey's new book are two paired questions: Should the United States government fund social science research? And, are the social sciences *really* "sciences"? Solovey traces debates over these two questions through a detailed organizational history of the National Science Foundation (NSF), focusing on the rising and falling fortunes of the social sciences, the strategies deployed by advocates for and critics of federal funding, and the consequences of those strategies for the evolution of the social sciences themselves. The result is a compelling and useful book, albeit one that in hewing so closely to the NSF's organizational history feels like it misses some opportunities to make stronger connections and compelling recommendations.

Solovey's central argument is that social scientists employed a persistent, strategic scientism in order to secure access to federal funding for basic research but that this strategy was only partially successful and had the consequence of marginalizing more humanistic forms of social research. By scientism, Solovey means specifically "the notion that the social sciences are part of a unified scientific enterprise, wherein the natural sciences are often considered more rigorous, more objective, and more advanced, and hence following their lead seems to be a valuable – and perhaps even essential – strategy for making progress in the social sciences." (12) Although this position was (and remains) controversial within the social sciences, Solovey clearly documents how those social scientists who sought support from the federal government consistently deployed scientific rhetoric to make their case, at times quieting their own hesitations to do so. The payoff was a consistent, but small, flow of funds from the NSF to the social sciences over the second half of the 20th century, but only to certain kinds of research. Behaviorist political science, neoclassical economics, statistical methodology, and data infrastructure (including large-scale social surveys) secured NSF support. In contrast, work that might be controversial in topic (e.g. on sexuality, on politics itself) or that adopted more humanistic frameworks (rejecting the claim that the social sciences are value neutral) struggled, and was tightly policed.

The book proceeds chronologically from debates leading up to the founding of the NSF in 1950 through the Reagan era, with the final chapter's post-script connecting the dots up through the present. In each era, Solovey focuses on the organizational structure of the NSF (especially the creation or elimination of stand-alone programs and units devoted to the social sciences), the professional background of key NSF personnel (including the NSF governing board, which typically had just one or two social scientists among its 24 members), and the total funding and percentage of funding allocated to the social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences and engineering (with the social sciences rarely obtaining much more than 5% of the NSF budget). Solovey also charts the political scrutiny placed on the NSF in general, and on social science research in particular, including Senator William Proxmire's famous "Golden Fleece" awards given to government projects perceived to be wasteful. A particularly fascinating 1979 debate between Proxmire and anthropologist Sherry Ortner illuminates both the potential for NSF-funded basic social science research into humanistic topics (in Ortner's case, religion in Nepal) and also the potential political blowback that continually pushed the NSF away from funding such research.

While most of the book lumps the social sciences together and charts their collective rise and fall, Solovey usefully draws on comparisons between the social sciences at a few key points. Of special interest to readers of this journal, in his discussion of the challenges faced by the NSF in the Reagan era in Chapter 8, Solovey offers an extended discussion of why economics fared better than the other social sciences. Here, Solovey connects developments within the discipline (including the rise of academic research programs supportive of Reagan's supply-side rhetoric, the links between the disciplinary mainstream and conservative institutions like the Hoover Institute, the emphasis on quantitative methods, and the success of large-scale data collection efforts like the Panel Study on Income Dynamics) to the relative ability of economics to maintain NSF support during an era when research funding in general, and social science research in particular, was under threat.

In part because Solovey tends to stick to the organizational dynamics of the NSF itself, and because he emphasizes the social sciences' shared fate vis-à-vis the natural sciences, I found myself wanting more about how NSF funding interacted with research program trajectories in the different social sciences. Absent those larger disciplinary histories, I found Solovey's opening claim (that strategic scientism marginalized humanistic inquiry) plausible, but not conclusive. That said, Solovey provides exactly the material that future scholars will need to tighten this argument, weaving together the details of NSF funding to debates happening in anthropology, sociology, or political science, and how the presence or absence of research funding and the prestigious aura of NSF support helped to reorient those fields at different moments in the 1950s-1980s.

Solovey ends his book asking us to reconsider a question raised several times over the history of the NSF: should the social sciences have their own funding agency separate from the NSF? Solovey thinks the answer might be "yes", and that the costs of strategic scientism (favoring the sort of social science that is most legible to natural scientists) have outweighed the benefits (a small piece of NSF research funding). Here, I wished Solovey had devoted more than a paragraph to looking at models from other countries. What difference does it make that Canada and Europe combine the social sciences with the humanities rather than the natural sciences? Has that link strengthened the humanistic social sciences? Absent the partial protection of the natural science's aura of legitimacy, how have social scientists in Canada and Europe defended themselves against political controversies? Alas, this important comparative work remains a task for a future author. Nonetheless, Solovey's detailed narrative history offers the reader a wealth of insight into the dynamics underlying choices surrounding the public funding of social science research and lays the groundwork for many future investigations into the broader politics of social scientific knowledge.