

Social Sciences: Shunned at the Frontier – *Susan Cozzens*

My task is to provide some historical perspective on Vannevar Bush and the social sciences. Bush was actually quite hostile to the social sciences in many ways. That was a form of jealousy, because the social sciences were so well established at the time that Senator Harley Kilgore's legislation to establish the National Science Foundation (NSF) began to be formulated.

The social sciences were, in fact, highly influential in government in the 1930's, and they had gotten to that point by quite a different route than the other sciences. The route the social sciences had used was their connection to the Progressive era and the vision of Americans using knowledge to work together to create a better life for themselves. There are a number of examples of this in the Progressive era. I will present two.

Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture under President Franklin Roosevelt, was convinced that the social sciences and the other sciences should share equal roles in the New Deal agriculture programs. He was a bit suspicious of other scientists, afraid that they were "turning loose upon the world new productive power without regard to the social implications, (Dupree 1957).

Another example comes from the National Planning Board, which was renamed the National Resources Board in the early 1930's. It started with three central, very influential members. One was Frederick A. Delano, the President's uncle, who had a background in city planning. In addition, there were two distinguished social scientists on the panel, Charles Merriam and Wesley Mitchell.

These people, as social scientists, were already in power, and there was no question about their position in government. They passed on the work of the National Resources Board to the National Academy of Sciences, which was trying to find a role for other sciences in government. They also asked the group working on this task to prepare a report on how the other sciences might be able to help with the effort. The National Resources Board ended

up operating with several forms of knowledge contributing rather equal roles for the natural sciences, social sciences, and education.

That's the background to the controversy over the inclusion of the social sciences in the NSF. This controversy is usually brought up in the discussions about the struggle between Vannevar Bush and Senator Kilgore. It is usually portrayed that Bush's original plan for the Foundation left out the social sciences and Kilgore wanted them in.

That is a bit of an oversimplification. It leaves out the fact that President Harry Truman and his Bureau of the Budget were also very much in favor of having the social sciences in the Foundation, presumably as an extension of the role social sciences had played earlier. It also leaves out the fact that what Kilgore was talking about in his bill was not really a full, equal role for the social sciences in the Foundation, but rather, a reference to the other sciences and related economic and industrial studies – not necessarily the social sciences as a whole.

When the social scientists testified on Senator Kilgore's Bill, they promoted this kind of adjunct role for the social sciences at the Foundation. For instance, Edwin Norris of the Brookings Institution argued that an adequate national defense hinged on the strength of the industrial system and that one needed to understand economic principles and practices in order to have a strong industrial system.

William F. Ogburn, a Chicago sociologist and a student of technological innovation, testified that all important inventions precipitate social change of various sorts, so a government that supports discovery also has a responsibility to support social science research to solve the resulting problems.

Herbert Americk, presenting a public administration perspective, argued that too much emphasis on physical science could lead to creation of "instruments" – this was probably a veiled reference to the bomb – without the counterbalancing knowledge and skill and their proper control and utilization for “the benefit of mankind.”

At that stage, there was a very clear association between the issue of social sciences at the NSF and problem-solving. Social sciences were seen not quite as the social conscience of the other sciences, but more like a kind of intellectual maid service that was going to come along and clean up the messes that were left behind.

The resolution of those difficult issues was a compromise position: the NSF legislation permitted, but did not require, the inclusion of the social sciences. It was left to later entrepreneurs to put the social sciences into place at the Foundation. The entrepreneur who did so, who might be known as the Vannevar Bush of the social sciences, was Harry Alpert, who entered NSF as part of its Program Analysis Office.

Alpert chose not to take up the argument for social-science programs at NSF on the basis of the adjunct subsidiary role that had been argued in the earlier hearings. Instead, he adopted a rationale under which social sciences would be fully parallel to the rest of the sciences NSF was supporting. Alpert stressed basic research in the social sciences, particularly in what he called the hard-science core of the social sciences. He also stressed that social-science knowledge, like the knowledge produced by other sciences, would have long-term impacts on government action, rather than be applied for short-term use. In other words, what he said to the sciences that were already being supported by NSF was, “we're just like you.”

The strategy Alpert advocated had real consequences for the kinds of science supported by the Foundation. However, he had to make that argument to the National Science Board, and they did not buy it completely.

When Alpert was able to put some programs into place, he supported one that was a straight social science program, but several that represented what they called convergent strategies, areas of social science research that had some affinity with areas already being supported by the Foundation. This led to the rather odd development that one of these early programs was sociophysical sciences in the engineering directorate, supporting subjects like mathematical social science, economic engineering, and statistical design. In addition, because of the personal interest of a division director, Raymond Saeger, there are history, philosophy and sociology of science.

The whole question of the role of the social sciences in NSF has continued to be controversial. It was a hot topic throughout the 1950's, and as late as 1958, the question of independent social science programs was still up for debate. There was a real concern that by letting these areas of inquiry into the Foundation, trouble of some sort would occur.

The National Science Board set up a four person task force to deal with the question of how independent those programs should be from the rest of the Foundation's mission. The task force came back evenly split. The negative side worried that social sciences would be "a source of trouble beyond anything released by Pandora," (England 1982).

The organizational ambivalence that can be traced throughout NSF's history in relation to social sciences began with the Bush era. Eventually, of course, the social sciences did get a program at the Foundation, then a division, and now a Directorate of Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences.

If you know some of the history, it appears that the directorate bears a great resemblance to the early mixes of programs -- the Science Resources Studies Division study is there, which purely tracks statistics about science as a whole. And just because there was no place else to put it, the International Programs Division was put into that directorate.

The research programs still stress what Alpert called the "hard-science core" of the social sciences; they still follow the "we're just like you" strategy. Because of that, they do not represent the full range of inquiry that social sciences represent in the university -- they are just a particular slice out of that range. In that sense, it is my view that they have contributed to the fragmentation of the social sciences by creating a gap in resources between people who follow differing modes of inquiry.

What is the message in this story? The ambiguous role of the social sciences at NSF has little to do with the character of social sciences themselves, with what social scientists actually do. It has everything to do, however, with the ambivalence of the other sciences toward the social context of their own activities.

We can interpret the marginalization of the social sciences as an unconscious method of pushing aside the broader vision of using a variety of scientific knowledges to create a better life. If we talked about creating a better life, then we would need to have a concrete way of bringing in the people who are actually going to live with the world that's transformed by science in the ways that Bush talked about.

Instead of reflecting something about social science itself, this marginalization of social science reflects a desire for a different vision – a vision of a protected technical world in which bright people can make discoveries in isolation, without regard for the full human context of those discoveries.

Fifty years have passed since *Science: The Endless Frontier*. Those 50 years have certainly demonstrated that that narrow technical vision is not viable for the 21st Century. The benefits that Bush promised can only be produced effectively by considering science in a fuller context. The question that the 21st Century really raises is how to create a fuller partnership than we have seen in the past between a socially responsible science on the one hand, and a full, rich, and independent set of social sciences on the other.