

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

by Blog Admin

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Numerous accounts have exposed the deep impact of sponsorship and patrons on the production of scientific knowledge and its applications. *Shaky Foundations* aims to examine a new patronage system for the social sciences in the USA that emerged in the early Cold War years, showing how social scientists were presented with new opportunities to work out the scientific identity, social implications, and public policy uses of academic social research. An important read exposing how money has functioned in determining the contemporary conditions of knowledge, writes **Kye Barker**.



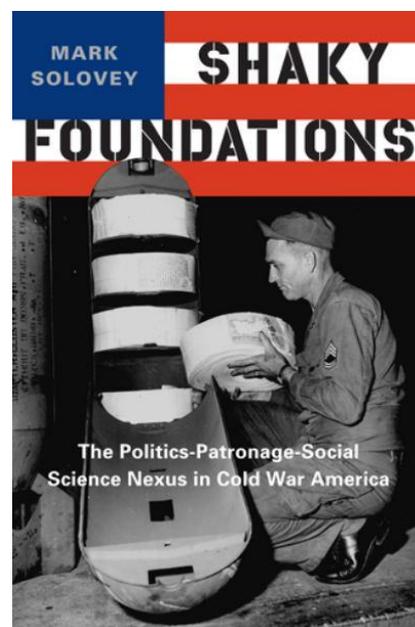
Shaky Foundations: The Politics-Patronage-Social Science Nexus in Cold War America. Mark Solovey. Rutgers University Press. April 2013.

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Social Science has always been a slightly uncanny field of study on the western side of the Atlantic. This is partially due to its modern origin in European thought, specifically that of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. In *Shaky Foundations: The Politics-Patronage-Social Science Nexus in Cold War America*, Mark Solovey uses an analysis of funding structures to show how this area of American academia developed during a pivotal moment: the early Cold War. It was during this period that American social science started to develop a structure and identity of its own, both of which have remained relatively consistent to this day.

The first fact that Solovey asserts is that this area of academia was not isolated from the rest of the world in the mythical 'Ivory Tower'. Truly, it had no desire to be. The real money was to be found elsewhere. Solovey analyzes the growth and institutionalization of the social sciences in the post-war period through case studies on three developing patronage-based relationships: with the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and the burgeoning military establishment. While the study of the interaction between the military establishment and social science academics stands for itself, the other two case studies provide synecdoches, respectively, for the relation between social science and big capital and politics. Solovey convincingly argues that these were the monetary relationships that guided the development of the social sciences, and delineated the questions that it posed for itself.

Solovey uses these three examples to provide a general assessment of the burgeoning patronage system. First, patrons systematically used their patronage to enlarge their extra-university positions. Second, the links between patrons and social scientists were built on the strategies of a putative unity of the social and natural sciences and the usefulness of social science for social engineering. Finally, a number of new challenges arose for social scientists during the Cold War. It is this third aspect of Solovey's central argument that is the most interesting, because the challenges that Solovey discovers for Cold War social science are still challenges for the social science of the present day.



What then were these challenges which have proved to be so enduring? The first challenge was that conservative voices drove social inquiry to paradoxically present itself in a value-neutral natural scientific model, and also to defend itself against claims that value-neutral work goes against the American cultural heritage. On the other end of the spectrum, liberal critics demanded a social science concerned with social justice, and were worried by the military and corporate elements which were driving social science away from its pre-War roots in social activism in the mold of the work of Charles Beard, Robert Staughton Lynd, and John Dewey. Not only liberals, but all careful observers worried about the threatened quality of scholarship, which could be undermined by the values that could seep into research through the patronage of big capital and the military.

On top of all of this, social scientists were put on the perpetual defensive against claims that social science did not produce the efficient and effective *results*, principally of the military variety, of the natural sciences, and thus were an inferior branch of knowledge. Efforts to counter such claims through developing more 'scientific' social sciences, such as the military-backed game-theory and the decision sciences, helped to bolster the rational-choice model of social science which is still very prevalent. To see the enduring salience of these challenges in contemporary politics, one need look no further than the ongoing, now rather successful, congressional Republican efforts against NSF funding for political science research, and specifically the indefatigable efforts of Senator Tom Colburn. Or one could look to the contemporary dominance and triumphalism of the economic study of society, being the most mathematical and thus 'scientific' of the social scientific approaches, over other social science disciplines.

There is another obviously important aspect to this book. The enduring relation of American social science to the intellectual landscape on the eastern side of the Atlantic is embodied in this book, and this period of history, in the spectre of the Soviet Union. The reader cannot help but ask him or herself, 'How did the recently institutionalized and nationalized American social science establishment, which was still dominated by the massive militarization of World War II, understand itself when its new enemy purported to unify social theory and practice through a gigantic system of central planning?' This question touches on many of the challenges that Solovey highlights. Although Solovey does not put this question at the centre of his book, the study is filled with the historical data which allows the reader to reach this question on his or her own.

This is an important book. It should not only be read by students of the intellectual history and history of science in the United States, but by anyone who is concerned with the contemporary conditions of knowledge in this context, and how money has functioned in determining those conditions. Although the Cold War has now been over for more than two decades, many of the issues that were addressed in this book have yet to be settled, and it is unlikely that they ever will be. The brilliance of this book lies in pinpointing the origins of the terms that are still used in contemporary debates on the role of social science in the United States. At our juncture of intellectual history, with our still disunited sciences and raging political debates on the proper role of this loosely collected area of academia, this book is a critical tool in approaching the most essential question – what next for American social science?

Kye Barker lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. In August 2012 he received an MA in the social sciences from the University of Chicago, and before that he earned a BA in history and political science from the University of Kansas. His research interests include the legacy of German émigré intellectuals in the mid-20th century, contemporary political theory, and aesthetics. Next year he will pursue a PhD in political theory. [Read more reviews by Kye.](#)