



La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS

7 | 2002

La biologie | Menaces sur les sciences sociales vers 1980

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/histoire-cnrs/548>

DOI : 10.4000/histoire-cnrs.548

ISSN : 1955-2408

Éditeur

CNRS Éditions

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 5 novembre 2002

ISBN : 978-2-271-06067-9

ISSN : 1298-9800

Référence électronique

Roberta Balstad Miller, « Crisis and Responses: the Politics of the Social Sciences in the United States (1980-1982) », *La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS* [En ligne], 7 | 2002, mis en ligne le 20 octobre 2006, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/histoire-cnrs/548> ; DOI : 10.4000/histoire-cnrs.548

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 30 avril 2019.

Comité pour l'histoire du CNRS

Crisis and Responses: the Politics of the Social Sciences in the United States (1980-1982)

Roberta Balstad Miller

- 1 After several decades in which the United States government increased its financial support for social science research, social scientists in the US were confronted in the early 1980s with an attempt, by a newly elected President, to significantly reduce governmental funding for their research. Within weeks of Ronald Reagan's election in late 1980, members of his transition team identified social science research budgets as a target for significant cuts in their new program of financial austerity. In the months following his inauguration in January, 1981, Reagan's new administration proposed budget cuts in the National Science Foundation (NSF), striking most deeply at the budget for the Division of Social and Economic Sciences.
- 2 The US government established the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the 1940s to provide financial support for scientific research in the country's universities. One of the early policy debates about the foundation was related to whether support for social science research should be included in its mandate¹. A compromise decision ultimately stipulated that support for social science research should not be prohibited, and the foundation gradually increased the financial resources available for research in the social sciences. By 1980, the NSF was supporting research in economics, political science, sociology, geography, anthropology, the history and philosophy of science, psychology and finally, law and social science. It was, in fact, the principal source of grants for primary social science research in universities in the United States.
- 3 The Reagan Administration proposed to reduce the budget for the foundation's Division of Social and Economic Science (SES) in the following fiscal year by 75%. This would have widespread ramifications in the social sciences. The Division of Social and Economic Science encompassed all the social science disciplines in the NSF, with the exception of anthropology and psychology, which were grouped with the neural sciences in the Foundation's Division of Behavioral and Neural Sciences (BNS). A budget cut of that

magnitude in SES would have affected all of these disciplines. BNS also was scheduled for budget cuts largely focusing on the social science programs of anthropology and psychology.

- 4 The SES's research budgets were, however, not the administration's only targets. Social science research programs in other federal agencies were also identified for budget reductions, and the administration proposed to eliminate additional government social science programs. The research community viewed these cuts as being very serious indeed, primarily because of their potential to hamper the social sciences by critically reducing the basic research that was being conducted in these fields.
- 5 To most social scientists, these decisions were as unwarranted as they were unexpected. The only rationale provided for the administration's budget cuts was that the work supported by these funds was of relative low priority, a standard rationale used to explain many of the budget cuts under the Reagan Administration. Due to this lack of a distinguishing rationale, social scientists accused President Reagan and his Director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman, a former Republican Congressman from Michigan, of taking an ideological approach to national policy. These scientists, more importantly, mounted a protracted political campaign in Washington for the first time, actively lobbying the US Congress against the administration's proposed budget for fiscal year 1982.
- 6 Their efforts were surprisingly successful. By 1982, the official position of the Reagan Administration regarding government support for social science research had softened, and the social science research budgets of a number of government agencies had been restored or were in the process of being restored. This would not have happened without the political activism of social scientists, who lobbied Congress to restore their research budgets.
- 7 The impact of these political activities, however, went beyond the congressional budget process. The social science community was altered by its organized political response to this threat. The long-term impacts of this activism were not clear at the time, though in retrospect one can see that this ordeal gave birth to a stronger, more self-conscious social science community that was better able to defend itself against opposition. This article will examine the background and the response to the Reagan Administration's budget proposals of 1981. It will also examine the long-range impacts of the social science community's response to this threat.

Background

- 8 There has been a long tradition of social science involvement in public policy in the United States. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, social scientists were deeply engaged in efforts to use research as a means of battling poverty and poor living conditions in America's cities, which were rapidly expanding due to industrialization and large-scale immigration from Europe. Much of this work was centered at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, both of which were located in major urban centers².
- 9 By the 1920s, social science research, influenced in part by availability of financial support from new private foundations, began to shift its focus from social reform to social theory³. The result was a blossoming of urban social science research with theoretical rather than policy goals. Yet social science interest in public policy did not disappear. Instead, it found expression in an involvement in policy and planning at the

national level. This practice was initially encouraged by then-President Herbert Hoover, who invited social scientists to evaluate recent social trends with an eye toward improving national policy, and was continued by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt⁴. Social scientists also made significant contributions to the war effort in the early 1940's⁵.

- 10 In the years following World War II, American universities expanded rapidly to meet the educational needs of returning soldiers. The number of professors in the social sciences grew to accommodate this post-war influx of students. The post-World War II period marked a change in the political economy of social science research. Financial support for social science research from private foundations continued as before the war, but growing federal spending for social research gradually dwarfed private support.
- 11 Federal research expenditures significantly increased the financial resources available for social science research. Fortunately, this rise coincided with a growing demand for research funding resulting from changes in the nature of social science research. At the time, there was a growing emphasis on international and area studies research, which required social scientists to conduct their research abroad. Conversely, domestically oriented social science research became increasingly dependent upon large-scale sample surveys, which were expensive to conduct and usually required external funding⁶.
- 12 Although it went unremarked at the time, the social science research community grew increasingly dependent on the growing federal expenditures for social science research. It must be noted, however, that social scientists who received financial support from the federal government were not constrained by the government in any way. They retained, of course, their freedom of speech and their right to express their opinions because they were generally employed by the universities where they were protected by the tenure system. Their dependence on the government had little effect on their intellectual or scholarly freedom of inquiry, and consequently few social scientists paid attention to the politics of the congressional budget process or its impact on social sciences.
- 13 Far more important than political influence on the overall research budget were the processes used to decide which research proposals to support. In the NSF, for example, funding decisions were made by a peer review system, organized by program officers in each discipline. In this system, social scientists in the universities evaluated the proposals submitted to the NSF according to the quality of the research, and government social scientists made the final funding decision based on this input. In effect, the social science research community controlled the selection process for NSF grants.
- 14 In other government agencies, these decisions were made by government officials with sectional research responsibilities and were based on both the quality of the research and the research needs of the agency. Regardless of their participation in the review and funding of research proposals, the growing dependence of social scientists on federal budgets – budgets that were determined by political rather than social scientific criteria – was a direct result of the expansion of government research funding in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 15 If the social science community ignored the political debate regarding federal research budgets and public policy for research, politicians were very aware of the social sciences. Periodically, members of Congress expressed ambivalence or even opposition to the idea of government support for social science research. In the late 1940s, congressional debate about establishing what later became the NSF stalled due to the opposition of many congressmen to the fact that this new agency would support social science research⁷.

- 16 Somewhat later, congressional debate erupted again over whether the NSF should be permitted to expend government funds on a secondary school curriculum that included social science instruction, in which, for example, students were introduced to such ideas as senilicide within Arctic cultures. The problem, according to these politicians, was that social scientists would corrupt American youth by exposing them to such concepts.
- 17 Among the various fields of science supported by the NSF, the social sciences were unique as the recipient of, at best, political ambivalence and, at worst, political attack. During much of this period, physicists, for example, enjoyed great respect from Congress. This was partly due to their central role in the war effort and the difficult nature of their field. It was even possible for a physicist to avoid answering a question posed by a congressman on the grounds that the congressman would not understand the difficult physics concepts required in the explanation.
- 18 Social scientists did not enjoy such political immunity. Everyone, whether within or outside the political system, felt qualified to evaluate the work of social scientists. In the 1970s, a number of congressmen began to include examples of unnecessary or unwise government expenditures in their budget speeches. Increasingly, these examples involved government-sponsored research in the social sciences.
- 19 Denouncing a NSF grant for the study of religion among the Sherpas of the Himalayas, for instance, provided an effective means of attacking the budget of a science agency without having to display one's ignorance about physics or chemistry. It was also an attack that stimulated no retaliation. There was no political price to be paid in belittling social science research, and there were clear political benefits to be gained from constituents who enjoyed hearing about government mismanagement. These constituents, however, were uneasy or uninterested in any discussion involving attacks on research in the physical sciences, considering the difficult, often inaccessible nature of the material. Thus, congressional attacks on specific social science research grants increased during the 1970s⁸.

The Election of 1980 and Its Aftermath

- 20 With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Republican Party regained control of the White House. Having been out of the White House for just four years, the party had many people who were well-versed in presidential politics and were prepared to move quickly to profit from the victory of the 1980 election. They decided to reduce the proposed Federal budget for fiscal year 1982 and to impose changes on the government that reflected the more conservative viewpoint of President Reagan and his supporters.
- 21 It is not clear what criteria were used to decide which areas of the federal budget to reduce. Still, the social sciences, although proportionally a small part of the total budget, were clearly a high priority for budget cuts. The rationale behind this decision is unknown, and the standard explanation that these fields were of relative low priority does not address the issue of why such comparatively minuscule budgets (in the context of overall federal expenditure) should be singled out for cuts.
- 22 The perception that most social scientists were Democrats, and that a reduction in social science research budgets would not jeopardize Republican votes, was undoubtedly a factor. In addition, there was a widespread perception within the Office of Management and Budget that social science research was concerned largely with issues that could only be resolved by government action. This perception was undoubtedly influenced by the highly visible role of social scientists in the Great Society programs of the 1960's under

Democratic President Lyndon Johnson⁹. From the perspective of the newly elected Reagan Administration, any type of research that fostered a greater government role in social and economic issues should be reduced, not expanded. Finally, there were some individuals working directly under Mr. Stockman at the Office of Management and Budget who, as part of an earlier Republican administration, had heavily invested in social science research on law enforcement issues. They later felt that this investment had been ineffective, and consequently blamed the social scientist who had been funded to carry out the research.

- 23 In February, 1981, the Reagan Administration announced that the federal budget initially proposed by President Jimmy Carter for the coming year would be revised. In the proposed revisions, social science research budgets were cut back dramatically, with the deepest cuts proposed for the NSF's Division of Social and Economic Science (SES)¹⁰. Focusing the largest cuts on the SES not only reduced the funding available for university social scientists to conduct basic research, but it also had a negative effect on the recruitment of students who were considering careers in the social sciences.
- 24 Fortunately for the social scientists, these budgetary decisions made by the Reagan Administration were viewed as threatening by natural scientists as well. Although many natural scientists were unimpressed by social science, the Reagan budget cuts made them feel vulnerable. Although they were opposed to the seemingly arbitrary political determination of social scientific research, they also believed that if social science budgets could be cut so drastically for ideological, rather than scientific, motives, there was nothing to stop elected officials from cutting research budgets in the physical or biological sciences. As a result, a large number of leading natural scientists spoke out publicly in opposition to the social science research budget cuts.

The Response of the Social Science Community

- 25 Social scientists responded quickly to these threats. It has been speculated that if the Reagan Administration's budget cuts had been less drastic, the response by social scientists would have been more muted and less organized. Under the circumstances, however, the proposed cuts appeared so threatening that social scientists ignored their previous assumptions about what constituted legitimate professional activities. They rallied to the support of federal social science programs, particularly the NSF. Social scientists contacted the Director of the NSF and members of the National Science Board, the governing board of the Foundation, in opposition to the cuts. Most important, however, they created a formal, registered lobbying group to fight these threats in the political arena.
- 26 In the United States, the various social science disciplines had formed associations that published scientific journals, held annual meetings and played an active role in the advancement of their disciplines. In early 1981, at the suggestion of the head of the Social Science Research Council, the directors of a number of these associations met to discuss a joint response to the budgetary crisis. The associations represented at these meetings included the American Political Science Association, the American Anthropological Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Association of Geographers, the American Sociological Association, the Linguistic Society of America, the American Economic Association, the American Historical Association, the Association of American Law Schools and the American Statistical Association. This group had met informally in the past and at one point had even decided to establish a formal organization, which they called the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA).

But the interests of the individual associations had always taken priority to those of the social sciences as a whole, and this new organization had never been formally created. Facing major cuts to social science research budgets, however, COSSA decided to establish a temporary office and hire a staff to lobby Congress.

- 27 A bit of background about the political process may be helpful. In the American political system, the separation of powers provides that annual budgets for expenditures by government agencies are first proposed by the President and then approved by Congress. In this process Congress can, and frequently does, alter the budget that has been presented. Finally, the President must sign the congressional budget.
- 28 In 1980, prior to the election, President Jimmy Carter prepared a budget for the fiscal year 1982 that was, however, never sent to Congress for approval. When they came to power, the Reagan Administration altered it considerably before submitting it to Congress. It was at this stage in the congressional approval process that COSSA intervened by lobbying to persuade Congress to restore the social science research funding eliminated by the Reagan Administration.
- 29 The story of how COSSA was initially established has been told elsewhere and I will not go into detail here¹¹. In brief, rather than hiring an experienced, professional lobbyist, COSSA hired two people – Joan Buchanan, a classicist with public policy experience, and myself, a historian and social scientist. Neither of us had direct political experience, but working with the COSSA Executive Committee, we devised a strategy that concentrated COSSA's efforts on winning the support of congressmen who had large universities in their districts. Social scientists in these districts visited, telephoned and sent letters to their representatives to show voter support for social science. We also focused our efforts on members of both the Democratic and Republican parties in order to emphasize that the issue of social science research funding should be considered outside the normal partisan framework.
- 30 The lobbying was effective both in restoring social science research budgets and in creating a visible political presence for social scientists. Neither of these goals could have been accomplished without the sustained support of a number of groups: social scientists in universities across the United States, social scientists in government (who were legally prohibited from lobbying), leaders within the natural science and science policy communities and organizations such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Rather than a temporary response to a crisis, COSSA became a permanent organization that has now operated for almost 20 years. Several other advocacy groups were formed around this time concentrating on government statistics, the behavioral and psychological sciences and the humanities. Together, a number of these groups successfully lobbied the NSF to form a separate directorate for the social, behavioral, and economic sciences in 1991.

Long Term Impacts

- 31 During the period of the Reagan budget cuts, social scientists responded to the external political threats to their research funding with a militant political response. When the budgetary threats receded after 1982, the social sciences in the United States had been changed in both overt and subtle ways. From today's perspective, twenty years later, some of these changes, such as the establishment of a permanent Washington-based infrastructure for political advocacy on behalf of the social sciences, are clearly evident. In other ways, however, the political threats reinforced separatist tendencies already

present in the social sciences and made certain types of scientific and policy changes more difficult to accomplish.

- 32 One of the most significant results of the Reagan budget cuts was the creation of a nationwide, politically aware community of social scientists. Because the Administration took political action against the social sciences, the response to these attacks was mounted in the name of the social sciences as a whole as opposed to one particular discipline. A group of previously disparate and independent disciplines committed themselves to work together by creating COSSA, an organization that represented them collectively.
- 33 Although the general public had long tended to group the social sciences together, social scientists usually did not. They rarely thought about their identity as social scientists. Only a small group of individuals, including the leadership of social science organizations, such as the Social Science Research Council, and federal employees responsible for overseeing social research programs in the government, routinely identified with the social sciences as a single entity prior to the attempted budget cuts. After the politicization of the social sciences in response to these cuts, however, social scientists were much more likely to see themselves as part of a larger social science community.
- 34 Similarly, the political crisis of the early 1980s forced the universities to defend the social sciences. Previously, university lobbyists in Washington had concentrated their efforts on those federal research and educational programs that provided large sums to the universities. The social science research programs were generally not given much attention, as their budgets were only rarely of the same magnitude as those destined for educational programs or for the natural sciences. The size and virulence of the social science budget cuts of 1981 forced these university representatives to devote time and attention to issues that concerned the social science faculty. Moreover, the universities themselves, recognizing the importance of social science advocacy to their faculties, made financial contributions to maintain COSSA.
- 35 After the first year of the Reagan Administration, when it had abandoned its attempts to decimate social science research programs, the institutional infrastructure of the social sciences had permanently changed. By that time, COSSA was an established organization, incorporated as a not-for-profit non-governmental organization, rather than an ad hoc response to a temporary crisis. It had a professional staff of lobbyists and representatives who monitored the political process in Washington to identify any budgetary or policy problems that might effect the social science community.
- 36 Nor was COSSA alone. By the end of the crisis, there were a number of groups that had been formed to serve as advocates for researchers in the social sciences. Statisticians established the Consortium of Professional Associations in Federal Statistics (COPAFS), and disciplines in the humanities such as history and languages created a lobbying group to support the research budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 37 Psychologists, numerically the largest discipline within the social sciences, created their own lobbying group for behavioral science research. The American Psychological Association (APA), which was considerably larger than the other social science disciplinary associations, employed a lobbyist, as did the independent Federation of Behavioral, Cognitive, and Psychological Sciences. Somewhat later, a group of psychologists broke away from the APA and formed the American Psychological Society, which had a strong lobbying emphasis.

- 38 The political infrastructure represented by these organizations was considerable. There was a professional lobbying staff working on behalf of the social sciences and a communications system in place to ensure that the social science community outside Washington would not be caught unaware by political attempts to reduce their resources. After the events of 1981, social scientists themselves were more sophisticated about budgetary and policy issues. They had successfully defeated sweeping budget reductions by a new conservative administration that was attempting to use the federal budgetary process to reverse the policies of a previous administration. In doing so, they had mounted an effort that resulted in the highest congressional vote against the Reagan Administration's budget proposals that year. This success created a new militancy in the social science community.
- 39 The crisis of 1981-1982 also resulted in strong public expression of support for the social sciences by natural scientists. The social and natural sciences previously had little in common and many natural scientists feared that too close an association with social scientists would weaken their own position in political budget discussions. In the 1980s, instead of isolating the social sciences, however, the Reagan budget cuts led to a working alliance between social and natural scientists. Natural scientists recognized that the two fields shared common concerns and vulnerabilities, and thus supported the cause of the social sciences.
- 40 The political support of the natural scientists was also valuable in subsequent years in discussions of science policy, where social science began to be included, and in the development of new multidisciplinary fields of research. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, as national and international policy leaders began to recognize the significant role played by mankind in the deterioration of the global environment, it was clear that social science was a critical component of the research necessary to understand the dynamics of environmental change. Nevertheless, riding on the success of defeating the Reagan Administration's attempt to cut their budgets and fearful of being relegated to an « auxiliary support role », social scientists were often reluctant to join natural scientists in multidisciplinary research activities.
- 41 Twenty years later, it is clear that there were other changes that may have come about as a result of this politicization that never materialized. There was, for example, little introspection after the events of 1981-1982 about the relationship between the social sciences and the Federal government. The operating assumption that the Federal government had a responsibility to support social science research was rarely questioned.
- 42 The basic justification for public support of the natural sciences since World War II had been utility, and the social sciences adopted the same approach in their battle against the budget cuts. The defense of the social sciences in 1981-1982 usually rested on its demonstrated utility to government and society. But such issues as the value of an oppositional social science, the implications of government control of research foci and problem selection, the political use of social science for public policy, and even ethical issues related to social engineering, were not addressed and were rarely voiced.
- 43 The events of 1981-1982 significantly altered the position of the social sciences within the politics of science in the United States and contributed to a stronger, more unified social science community. It is time for that community, which now has considerable political sophistication, to better understand its intellectual role in society. In a sense, the Reagan Administration's budget cuts struck not only at the financial support of social science

research and the professional legitimacy of that work, but also at the ideological and political implications of the use of such research in a system of governance. At this point, federal financial support for social science research has stabilized and continues to grow, and the professional legitimacy of these fields is unquestioned. The next steps for social scientists are to go beyond these fundamental issues, important as they are, in order to weigh the future roles that they may play in the service of society.

NOTES

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Mots-clés : social sciences, national science foundation, NSF

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