

Book Review

Jamie Cohen-Cole. *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 397 pp. Cloth \$45.00.

Historians have made the human and social sciences in twentieth-century America a hot topic of late, as attested by first books from Joel Isaac, Andrew Jewett, Joy Rohde, and Mark Solovey since 2012, as well as by other monographs, edited collections, and special issues of journals. Jamie Cohen-Cole's first book joins this fray. *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* is a deeply contextualized study of the human sciences in postwar American political culture. It shows how elite intellectuals from those fields constructed a vision of the prototypical American—the open-minded self, “characterized by autonomy, creativity, and the use of reason” (p. 1). Their project had great success. Within the human sciences, it motivated prominent developments from the rage for interdisciplinarity to the cognitive revolution. In a more ambitious claim, Cohen-Cole contends that “the virtues of the open mind became, for a time, nearly invisible norms of American culture . . . shaping the intellectual, social, and political life of Cold War America” (p. 2).

The Open Mind is divided into four parts following the introduction: “The American Mind,” “The Academic Mind,” “The Human Mind,” and “The Divided Mind.” Each part has one topic that stands out. In “The American Mind,” it is Cohen-Cole's reinterpretation of the Harvard report *General Education in a Free Society* (1945), widely known as the Redbook. His analysis is based on a study of the Records of the Committee on General Education in a Free Society, which provide “a more candid, less carefully edited and measured view of education and democracy than what the committee put into published form” (p. 19). According to Cohen-Cole, the Redbook rejected two approaches common at the time. One, associated with the general education movement, held that the college curriculum should be oriented around the practical problems of everyday life. The other, under the banner of liberal education, promoted a core curriculum of great books. By contrast, the Redbook promoted “a vision of the right kind of mind for America that came to have lasting influence” (p. 16). Cohen-Cole describes this mind with language familiar in debates about college education today: “the mentality to be molded was not based on knowledge but on intellectual skills” (p. 22). The committee wanted “a program that would unify Americans without requiring them all to read the same books” (p. 23). Skills would help the nation “cohere by way of a special national

character of mind" (p. 26). In a modern society "characterized by innumerable modes of expertise," the central skill that general education must teach was "the ability to judge specialist competence from a non-specialist perspective" (p. 25). Such education would protect America "from undemocratic rule by experts unaccountable to a public that did not understand them" (p. 31). The committee analogized the process of vetting experts from various fields to American democracy, in which citizens needed "to evaluate politicians in their 'field' of governance" (p. 26).

Harvard's general education project was not alone in "plac[ing] high value on intellectual breadth achieved through communication" (p. 85). Another enterprise that did so was interdisciplinarity, which Cohen-Cole tabs as an exemplar of "The Academic Mind." In Chapter 3, "Interdisciplinarity as a Virtue," he makes an especially salutary contribution to our understanding of postwar social science by depicting the widespread enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity. He argues that interdisciplinarity was "an expression of historically and culturally specific values." For instance, by emphasizing the capacity of researchers in different fields to cooperate, interdisciplinary work exemplified American pluralism. More strikingly, the term "interdisciplinary" came to refer not just to research but to a type of person. It "marked an individual as creative, practical, open-minded, tolerant, and scientific" (p. 67). The interdisciplinary person was thus an ideal citizen in American democracy.

Cohen-Cole also contends that this wave of interdisciplinarity emerged from a struggle over what made social science scientific. Proponents of interdisciplinarity defined their approach in contrast to modes of research that they saw as mere "empiricism," particularly experimental psychologists "working in the behaviorist and operationist tradition." Moreover, "advocates of interdisciplinarity contended that attachment to empiricism was itself a religious, unscientific dogma that prevented collaboration between people in different fields" (p. 102). They believed that such empiricist researchers were not open-minded Americans.

This contrast set the stage for the emergence of cognitive science, which is the major topic in the book's third section, "The Human Mind." The central thinker there is Jerome Bruner, whom Cohen-Cole establishes as an important figure in American intellectual history. In Chapter 6, "Instituting Cognitive Science," Cohen-Cole provides a stellar portrait of an organized research unit, Harvard's Center for Cognitive Studies, co-founded by Bruner in 1960. He offers a masterful analysis of how the Center's move to a new building contributed to changing its culture, which is an excellent example of how spatial arrangements and aesthetics impact intellectual work.

Cohen-Cole describes cognitive science, like interdisciplinarity, as a product of its specific historical milieu. He shows how cognitive science took mental attributes valued in Cold War political culture, such as being “rational, democratic, scientific, and creative,” and “made these attributes characteristic of all humans” (p. 191). Many *History of Education Quarterly* readers will be particularly interested in Chapter 7, “Cognitive Theory and the Making of Liberal Americans,” where Cohen-Cole argues that the prominent NSF-funded social studies curriculum “Man: A Course of Study” (MACOS), designed by Bruner, carried the “cognitive worldview” beyond intellectual circles to millions of Americans.

MACOS aroused considerable criticism, especially from conservatives. The book’s final section, “The Divided Mind,” details these attacks in reinterpreting the “fracture” (p. 259) of the liberal consensus after the mid-1960s as an unraveling of “the cultural web sustained by open-mindedness” (p. 217). Cohen-Cole shows that MACOS was in fact politicized, but not quite in the way that conservatives charged. Conservatives particularly erred in claiming the influence of John Dewey and leading behaviorist psychologist B.F. Skinner on MACOS, when in fact Bruner and his team specifically designed MACOS in opposition to the pedagogies associated with both thinkers (p. 201, pp. 249–250).

The Open Mind enters a lively historiographical debate about whether the Cold War should be the leading framework for understanding universities and social science in postwar America, and it provides a challenging argument in the affirmative. Yet it also at least implicitly makes the case for continuity across the boundary of 1945. For instance, Cohen-Cole takes pains to show that part of the impetus for interdisciplinarity stemmed from the belief that it was “the best way to produce practical results” (p. 86), and that this belief dominated elite social science even before World War II, contrary to the frequent assertion that interdisciplinarity became in vogue only after the war proved its utility.

Many readers will consider *The Open Mind* alongside Jewett’s *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (2012) and Isaac’s *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (2012). While *Science, Democracy, and the American University* is broader than *The Open Mind* chronologically and in the range of institutions considered, both books offer intellectual history tightly tied to political concerns, specifically about the American character. Indeed, each book highlights a group of thinkers who believed that making America scientific was the key to keeping it democratic. Yet the particular relationship between science and democracy is different in the two cases. One measure of that difference is the status of John Dewey. Although Dewey was the hero of early twentieth-century

“scientific democracy” in Jewett’s account, notable thinkers in *The Open Mind* such as the Redbook authors and the founders of cognitive science had little use for Dewey. At first glance, this observation might bolster Jewett’s contention that scientific democracy waned after the 1930s, but the issue is more complex and warrants deeper reflection than space allows here.

The Open Mind shares a different set of similarities with *Working Knowledge*, most notably a focus on the human sciences around Harvard in the middle of the twentieth century, with an emphasis on informal and interdisciplinary structures, even the way that social settings shaped intellectual life. But although *Working Knowledge* defines itself as intellectual and institutional history, *The Open Mind* maintains an open mind about what it is, insisting that it is not only intellectual (or cultural, or political) history, since “articulations of open-mindedness occurred in multiple places at once and operated on all registers at once” (p. 254). Again, there are possible interpretive differences between the two books that cannot be untangled in this space. For Cohen-Cole, operationism and interdisciplinarity were opposed, while interdisciplinary stalwarts Talcott Parsons and Thomas Kuhn attacked positivist visions of science (p. 150). In Isaac’s telling, things are more complicated: a decidedly interdisciplinary milieu at Harvard that he calls “the interstitial academy” shaped operationism, Parsons, and Kuhn, all of which get a chapter-length treatment. Both books have added much to our understanding, but we also need studies like these centered outside of Harvard.

The Open Mind is a rich book. It provides considerable food for thought to those interested in postwar America, and it deserves a wide readership.

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