

# Institutional Logics and the Limits of Social Science Knowledge

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As someone whose training is in political science and who writes about the history of my own discipline, I admit to some hesitation in recommending future avenues of research for historians of education. For that reason, the following thoughts are directed toward disciplinary history broadly and social science history specifically. Moreover, the three articles that contributors to this forum were asked to use as inspiration suggest that any future I would recommend has been under way in one form or another for a while.<sup>1</sup> For those reasons, I want to reframe my contribution as a reflection on a particular mode of analysis all three authors employed and how it may be particularly useful for exploring the questions of power, exclusion, and race- and gender-making in the academy that are present in all three articles and that explicitly animate two of them.

Each of these authors focuses on the material and institutional contexts of knowledge production, or what political theorist and disciplinary historian Nicolas Guilhot calls the “backstage logistics” of intellectual life: that “range of external factors—institutional support, availability of funding, critical developments within adjacent fields, alliances with outside stakeholders such as policymakers or bureaucrats, and a wealth of other issues that are too often absent from

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<sup>1</sup>James D. Anderson, “Race, Meritocracy, and the American Academy during the Immediate Post-World War II Era,” *History of Education Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 151–75; Mary Ann Dzuback, “Gender and the Politics of Knowledge,” *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 171–95; and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, “The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation and the Formulation of Public Policy,” *History of Education Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 205–20.

conventional intellectual histories.”<sup>2</sup> The authors here do not emphasize the usual subject matter of disciplinary or intellectual history—ideas, debate, “schools” of thought and the like. Nevertheless, each of the articles in turn offers hints as to how these “backstage” goings-on shape, limit, or enable the kinds of intellectual production that emerge from the contexts they describe in terms of who gets to speak and what gets said. They paint a compelling picture of how the history of ideas can be enriched by embedding it squarely in the political economy and institutional context of academic work. In particular, they point to what Toni Morrison called the “unspeakable things unspoken”—dynamics of exclusion and marginalization in the academy as well as the production of “ornate, planned” silences with regard to racial oppression, exploitation, and gender inequality.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, James Anderson’s and Mary Ann Dzuback’s contributions are particularly rich with regard to the latter. In Anderson’s hands, an obscure campaign in the run-up to World War II by Julius Rosenwald Fund officials to get northern university presidents to hire African American faculty becomes an illuminating case study of how a discourse of “meritocracy” provided ostensibly “nonracist” rationales for excluding even the most extraordinarily accomplished black scholars. At the same time, we see in Dzuback’s account of their “backstage” work that white women around the turn of the twentieth century mobilized that same discourse, along with class-based connections to philanthropists, to carve out limited spaces for themselves in mostly hostile academic institutions.

Ellen Condliffe Lagemann’s article turns directly to the political economy of knowledge production. In this piece at least, Lagemann doesn’t literally follow the money—readers learn little of the sums Carnegie doles out or to whom they flow. All the same, her account illuminates the powerful impetus early twentieth-century philanthropy gave to certain forms of social science research at the expense of others. Specifically, the Carnegie Foundation promoted ostensibly objective, detached (male) expertise at the expense of a community-centered, reform-oriented sociology associated with settlement workers, many of them women. In this case, philanthropy reflected and magnified developments internal to the social sciences. American

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<sup>2</sup>Nicolas Guilhot, ed., *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>3</sup>Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (Tanner Lecture on Human Values, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, Oct. 7, 1988), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0028.001.01>.

social scientists' long-standing frustration with methodological limitations, along with a sense that existing social and political theory was inadequate to a rapidly changing economy and population, gave force, in the early decades of the twentieth century, to a push for the "more 'rigorous' and . . . theoretical approach" thought to "yield more cumulatively and universally valid results" that Carnegie officials associated with mostly male, university-based scholars.<sup>4</sup> But it also reflected the political project animating much private foundation support for academic research in this period.

Foundation leaders were concerned with the excesses of unregulated industrial capitalism and hoped that universities would help to discover how to tame those excesses. At the same time, these elites were leery of research that might be overly critical—like much of the social survey work of "amateur" reformers—or give anyone big ideas about social and political change from below. Instead, they were beginning to drop what Lagemann identifies as a "nineteenth-century conception of policy-making" that emphasized protecting (white, male, individual) freedom to a twentieth-century conception that relied on the authority of experts to manage what they saw as an increasingly unruly society.<sup>5</sup> If free markets in goods and ideas were no longer adequate for ordering social and economic relationships, that job would fall to enlightened governance, informed by detached, objective expertise. (Lagemann quotes one Carnegie official musing that "accurate information relevant to [Americans'] 'domestic problems'" might not only aid policymakers, but could also "provide an 'antidote' to socialist and anarchist 'propaganda.'")<sup>6</sup>

What Lagemann is describing, in part, is an early stage in the development of what became "the policy sciences"—loose, interdisciplinary big science networks discussed in this issue by Christopher Loss that joined universities, foundations, government agencies, and private think tanks and that aimed to give a rational basis to governance and to direct private efforts at ameliorating social and political problems.<sup>7</sup> This is an area in which social science, policy, and questions of race and gender inequality have intersected in particularly consequential ways. In what follows I will briefly discuss examples of other work on the "backstage" dynamics of knowledge production that offer important insight into those intersections and raise further

<sup>4</sup>Lagemann, "The Politics of Knowledge," 207.

<sup>5</sup>Lagemann, "The Politics of Knowledge," 215.

<sup>6</sup>Lagemann, "The Politics of Knowledge," 212.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Loss, "No Operation in an Academic Ivory Tower: World War II and the Politics of Social Knowledge," *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (May 2020), 214–227.

questions for both historical research and the organization of knowledge production today.

Before doing so, however, it is worth noting that “race” has long been a central preoccupation for the social sciences in America—in fact, I would argue that it was the founding preoccupation. As the social sciences took shape as university-based disciplines in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century, each discipline’s center of gravity was substantially committed to white supremacy as both analytical framework and political project. To give just a few representative examples, the founders of the first major PhD-granting departments in political science and history in the US were John W. Burgess (at Columbia) and Herbert Baxter Adams (at Johns Hopkins University). For them and their students, American political institutions were the flowering of a “Teutonic germ of liberty” planted in the New World by Anglo-Saxon settlers, and as such required Anglo-Saxon domination for their continued health and development.<sup>8</sup> This racialized, teleological view of civilization similarly animated anthropology’s “comparative method,” which viewed nonwhite peoples as possibly irremediably stalled on the expected trajectory from “savagery” to “barbarism,” and then finally “civilization.” Franklin Giddings, who in 1894 became the chair of sociology at Columbia and the first full professor in that discipline in the US, argued that the distinction that mattered was between “nonreflective” groups and the “reflective” (white) societies capable of evolutionary progress. He also held that an innate “consciousness of kind” led members of racial groups to instinctively prefer their own and avoid others.<sup>9</sup> White historians, such as William A. Dunning, who were committed to professionalizing the discipline and the scientific reconstruction of the past “as it really was,” were no less committed to a retelling of the recent American past in which Reconstruction had been a “hideous tyranny” of “negro domination,” the tragic misadventure of a Radical Republican Congress in thrall to what the historians saw as delusions of possible racial equality.<sup>10</sup> And pioneering statistician

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<sup>8</sup>Jessica Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>9</sup>George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 114, 130. See also Franklin Henry Giddings, *The Principles of Sociology: An Analysis of the Phenomena of Association and of Social Organization*, 3rd ed. (New York: MacMillan Company, 1896).

<sup>10</sup>Eric Foner, “The Supreme Court and the History of Reconstruction—and Vice-Versa,” *Columbia Law Review* 112, no. 7 (Nov. 2012), 1585. See, for example, William A. Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction and Related Topics* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897); and William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907).

and economist Frederick Hoffman's magnum opus, *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, used actuarial evidence to argue, sanguinely, that black Americans were so unsuited to the conditions of American civilization that they would eventually die out.<sup>11</sup> These views represented widespread and fundamental assumptions among the most esteemed of that first generation of university-based social scientists in the US. Moreover, they authorized a similarly widespread acceptance of the principles that the (white, male leaders of the) nation had a responsibility to assume imperial responsibility over "backward" peoples abroad and that Jim Crow was an analogous, if imperfect, solution to the problems of racial coexistence at home in the postslavery era.<sup>12</sup>

Most social scientists are at least dimly aware of this ignominious past. At the same time, that awareness is often counterbalanced by the more heroic story of social scientific discrediting of biological determinism, a saga that culminated in the 1950 UNESCO statement on race.<sup>13</sup> As sociologist Stephen Steinberg puts it, in this narrative, the "singular achievement of American social science was to bracket 'race' with quotation marks, signifying that it is a social construction and not a biological fact."<sup>14</sup> And indeed, by the 1930s, the modern

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<sup>11</sup>Frederick L. Hoffman, "Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro," *Publications of the American Economic Association* 11, no. 1–3 (New York: American Economic Association, 1896).

<sup>12</sup>Of course, there were outliers as well as brilliant African American dissenters such as W. E. B. Du Bois, many of whom produced work that would become influential in their fields. However, these perspectives and scholars were largely excluded from the forefront of those early departments and professional associations. See, for example, Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); and Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). Nonetheless, these figures were the exception rather than the rule. It is also worth noting that many of that first generation of social scientists opposed American expansion in the wake of the Spanish-American War. But in general this was a matter of timing, not principle—the United States simply wasn't ready. As John W. Burgess put it, "So long as we remain in large measure a mixed population of Americans, Europeans and Africans; . . . so long as we have an Indian problem and a Mormon problem and a negro problem . . . we should more nearly follow the natural order of things, if we should remain at home. . ." Burgess, "How May the United States Govern Its Extra-Continental Territory?," *Political Science Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (March 1899), 1–2.

<sup>13</sup>"Statement on Race, Paris, July 1950," in *Four Statements on the Race Question* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1969), 30–35, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000122962>.

<sup>14</sup>Stephen Steinberg, *Race Relations: A Critique* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 6.

culture concept had begun to replace racial determinism as the paradigmatic social scientific framework for understanding group differences.<sup>15</sup> Still, as Steinberg argues, even if this new account of group differences marked an important and radical break from the racism that had infused the work of those founding figures, the alternative, largely behavioristic, accounts of group inequality that would come to dominate the social sciences by the postwar era were often tepid or apolitical, treating the “race problem” as primarily psychological rather than rooted in fundamental social structures or political or economic relationships.

Urban sociologist Robert Park and his “Chicago School” colleagues’ “race-relations cycle” is among the first and best remembered of these alternative accounts. For Park, progress toward “assimilation” was part of a social-evolutionary cycle that operated on a kind of naturalistic logic—rendering more or less useless any social or political intervention meant to hurry that progress along.<sup>16</sup> On a different register, mid-century studies like Gordon Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice* and Gunnar Myrdal’s *The American Dilemma* framed racial oppression as largely the product of the irrational, racist ideas (largely held by poor whites) that seemed to persist alongside America’s egalitarian national “creed.”<sup>17</sup>

By the postwar era, elements of these two accounts converged to constitute what Steinberg characterizes as a “dominant” “race relations” paradigm. For Steinberg, this meant that the mainstream of American social science in the postwar era departed from an assumption that “racial prejudice [arose] out of a natural antipathy between groups on the basis of difference.” It also meant that mainstream looked to gradual, primarily educational and cultural processes, rather than more sweeping political action or programs of economic redistribution, for solutions to America’s persistent racial issues.<sup>18</sup> As a result, as American Sociological Association president Everett C. Hughes admitted somewhat perplexedly in 1963, social science was

<sup>15</sup> Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 232.

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921).

<sup>17</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954); and Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944). It is worth noting that Myrdal’s study in fact contained a great wealth of information pointing squarely to the political economy of racial oppression in America. Yet the moral of the story, for most readers, was to be found in Myrdal’s framing of the “dilemma” presented by the conflict between white Americans’ racial attitudes and their professed commitments to equality.

<sup>18</sup> Steinberg, *Race Relations*, 14.

ill-equipped to either anticipate or theorize “the explosion of collective action of Negro Americans toward immediate full integration into American society” that was unfolding all around them.<sup>19</sup>

For Steinberg, the pervasiveness and staying power of the race relations frame, despite such failures, is symptomatic of the political quietism of the academy, and particularly of the fact that it was for a long time, and to an extent continues to be, dominated by elite, white men. This is hard to argue with. It also seems clear that gradualist, psychological approaches to racial problems would appeal to Cold War-era social scientists for whom any analyses too critical of America’s institutions or economic system would have appeared politically dangerous, even if individual social scientists didn’t find them distasteful. However, an examination of those “backstage” machinations that Guillhot and Lagemann highlight shows that if we were to content ourselves with this explanation, we would miss much. For example, as work by historians Leah Gordon and Alice O’Connor shows, we would lose how key features of the American academy—in particular, the funding models and institutional organization of both the traditional social sciences and their cousins, the policy sciences—shaped scholarship about race in America and caused certain pressures to weigh particularly heavily on African American scholars.<sup>20</sup>

In *From Power to Prejudice*, Gordon’s history of mid-century social scientific engagement with “the race problem,” the rise of the race relations framework, or what Gordon calls “racial individualism,” does not appear as a kind of paradigmatic shift to a new normal science. Rather, what we see is a set of factors working to constitute one set of approaches to questions of racial inequality as mainstream and (crucially) policy relevant, while consigning other, more critical approaches to more limited intellectual spaces. Specifically, she shows that from at least the 1930s through the immediate postwar period, racial individualism competed with a “robust” tradition of “social structural and political economic analyses of the race issue” that was largely developed by scholars associated with the African American popular front and the interracial left.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Everett C. Hughes, “Race Relations and the Sociological Imagination,” *American Sociological Review* 28, no. 6 (Dec. 1963), 879.

<sup>20</sup>Leah N. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015); and Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup>Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*, 3. Scholars working in this latter tradition largely followed the radical African American sociologist Oliver Cox in objecting to Myrdal’s “mystical” interpretation of racial inequality in America. As Cox put it, *An American Dilemma* brought “to finest expression practically all the vacuous theories

Within a few decades, however, a number of things converged to tilt the playing field in favor of racial individualism and away from critical, “relational” frameworks for understanding America’s racial hierarchy. Those things included pressures from funders (themselves under scrutiny from Congressional investigations of possible foundation subversion) to avoid controversy. At the same time, the establishment of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950 presented both a fresh opportunity and fresh incentives to produce research that promised to meet scientific standards of rigor and avoid any appearance of advocacy. Research focused on individual behavior and attitudes fit both these bills nicely. Sweeping studies of attitudes at once diffused responsibility (often devolving blame on working-class whites who existed at a comfortable social distance from policy scientists and their sponsors) and suggested relatively tame policy solutions, most of them educational in nature. Moreover, thanks to devices such as attitude scales and new survey methodologies (many developed in the course of wartime government research), individual behaviors and attitudes were measurable, could be aggregated into large data sets, and were susceptible to rigorous statistical treatment, promising both theoretical generalizability and a kind of apolitical, “mechanical objectivity.”<sup>22</sup>

Postwar social scientists’ efforts to demonstrate their worthiness for science funding produced mixed results—NSF embrace of the social sciences was gradual and grudging<sup>23</sup>—but the theoretical orientation they encouraged proved useful as the pressures exerted by the civil rights movement generated increased interest in policy solutions. That is, just as Lagemann shows that the Carnegie Corporation had looked to policy informed by science to contain the harms of industrial capitalism (within acceptable limits), Gordon shows that this period saw the emergence of a sense of urgency among foundation officials and civic leaders for actionable, nonradical policy responses to the “race problem.”

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of race relations which are acceptable among the liberal intelligentsia and which explain race relations away from the social and political order.” To illustrate his objection of “mysticism,” Cox observed that, “if beliefs per se could subjugate a people, the beliefs which Negroes hold about whites should be as effective as those which whites hold against Negroes.” Oliver C. Cox, “An American Dilemma: A Mystical Approach to the Study of Race Relations,” *Journal of Negro Education* 14, no. 2 (April 1945), 132, 143.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>23</sup>While social scientific research did receive some support beginning in the 1950s, it took eighteen years for the NSF charter to be amended to explicitly include support for the social sciences.



Gordon shows that this context pushed even many scholars and activists who otherwise (or at other moments) were clear that racial issues in America required meaningful social and political transformation to a strategic advocacy, at least in part, of individualizing, psychological approaches. As a result, many scholars “acquiesced to brands of racial liberalism about which they articulated theoretical reservations.”<sup>24</sup> Those who didn’t, particularly in African American intellectual spaces, were often seen more as advocates than as scientists and consigned to niches of their disciplines rather than integrated into the nexus of social science research, large-scale foundation and government research funding, and policy development.<sup>25</sup>

O’Connor’s *Poverty Knowledge* describes similar dynamics structuring policy research on poverty and inequality in the late twentieth century. O’Connor shows that in the years following the administration of President Ronald Reagan, when support for redistributive policy was weak, liberal poverty researchers associated with the administration of President Bill Clinton contributed to the “end of welfare as we know it,” often much to their own dismay. She also shows that they promoted racist and deeply patriarchal narratives that located causes of poverty in—and targeted remedies at—the behavior of the poor (rather than the structure of the economy), and particularly the supposed deficiencies of African American mothers. In her account, while internal, intellectual factors certainly played a role in the direction of “poverty knowledge,” the preferences of private and government funders, the agenda-setting power of a growing network of right-wing think tanks, and, most importantly, diminished political possibilities in an era of antigovernment backlash were arguably more important. By focusing on individual-level variables and factors such as “social capital” and family structure, liberal poverty researchers were able to craft policy solutions that stood a chance of being implemented. At the same time, despite the professed intentions and preferences of many poverty researchers, and particularly in the hands of a Republican majority in Congress, these policy frameworks ultimately had the effect of amplifying vicious narratives about black women and providing rationales for eviscerating social protections and aiming punitive measures at poor families and individuals.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*, 54, 23.

<sup>25</sup>Gordon points out that Rockefeller funding directed at African American institutions was meant more often as support for the education of African American students, rather than as support for African American scholars’ research. Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*, 13.

<sup>26</sup>O’Conner, *Poverty Knowledge*.

O'Connor shows that the same pressures also helped to reinforce hierarchies and exclusions within structures of research and knowledge production. African American and women scholars were under particular pressure to demonstrate both detached objectivity and "realism," lest they be suspected of engaging in advocacy rather than science. Similar dynamics devalued the perspectives of poor people themselves, "putting poverty knowledge in a position not just to reflect but to replicate the social inequalities it means to investigate."<sup>27</sup>

In short, by "rooting intellectual history in institutions," Gordon and O'Connor give nuanced accounts of how prejudice and culture (rather than oppression or exploitation) came to be the dominant social scientific frames for the study of race in the second half of the twentieth century. They also shed light on the mechanisms and discourses that marked alternative, critical perspectives as marginal and worked to cast doubt on the scientific objectivity of African American scholars. Moreover, they raise uncomfortable questions about the persistence of many of those mechanisms and discourses.

The qualms about social science research funding that these stories provoke are familiar, if far from solved. At the same time, however, these accounts and similar ones help, often in counterintuitive ways, to decode the language in which Morrison's "unspeakable things" are, in fact, spoken; the "ornate absences" she invokes, planned; and how those absences have been contested. Dzuback's article is an example of the latter—we see that it is in small-scale, behind-the-scenes maneuvering that women made some institutions more welcoming to their scholarship and to (primarily white) women's scholarship more broadly. With regard to the former, Anderson's analysis of the correspondence between foundation officials and university presidents illustrates how discourses of "meritocracy," rather than opening opportunities to exceptional African American scholars, became a powerful instrument of exclusion in faculty hiring. Similarly, Gordon's and O'Connor's histories ask us to think deeply about how the seemingly innocuous criterion of policy relevance marginalizes critical perspectives and often constructs white scholars as the only ones capable of objectivity. These informal, backstage processes are unglamorous—I have come to think of them as the low politics of knowledge. However, as the works I discussed here show brilliantly, in examining their operations we may be able to see large-scale issues—like structural racism/exclusion and shifting political winds—being translated into concrete effects for both knowledge and knowledge workers. As such, they raise questions that anyone trying to understand the exclusionary dynamics of the academy historically and in the present

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<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 11.

must grapple with. And they provide illuminating, if perhaps depressing, insight into why, despite often producing system-challenging knowledge, the social sciences in America have only rarely been an instrument of system-challenging politics.