

Philanthropic Funding of the British Social Sciences after World War Two

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Abstract

My research undertaken at the Rockefeller Archive Center focused on US philanthropic funding of the British social sciences in the post-World War Two period. In particular, I was interested in the significance of Rockefeller Foundation funding for the development of anthropology and sociology in British universities and research institutes. While the significance of the Rockefeller Foundation for the growth and consolidation of British social anthropology in the interwar period has been well established, there has been little consideration of this later period. Studies of philanthropic funding of the social sciences in the post-war period, moreover, often concentrate on the impact of the Cold War and the foreign policy objectives that are perceived to drive the patronage of particular research agendas, inevitably centring the US perspective. However, Mark Solovey, for example, has pointed to the multiple factors beyond Cold War politics that influenced academic perspectives, such as personal relationships, local dynamics, and transnational networks. Along these lines, by focusing on the attitudes and interests of the British-based applicants and recipients of funding from US foundations, as well as the foundations themselves, I hope to shift the focus away from US foreign policy objectives and towards the dynamics of the social sciences in Britain in the post-war period, as well as the transatlantic interactions between academics in these fields. This investigation of the relationship between US foundations and British academics is part of my broader project that aims to uncover some of the negotiations and compromises that lie behind the production of particular works and ideas in the field of social anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s.

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While the scale of funding that British academics received from the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) in the 1950s and 1960s was relatively small, it remained a source of income for several university departments, as had been made clear from my earlier examination of the University of Manchester's archives, for example.⁴ Organisations such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, even where they did not ultimately provide funding, also represented an alluring potential source of

support, and the applications submitted by British academics reveal the hope they placed in the Rockefeller Foundation as a possible source of financial independence. Indeed, the materials preserved in the Rockefeller Archive Center, in relation to funding applications and projects, offer insight into both the production of knowledge and the dynamics at play in academia in this period. The diaries of RF officers, for example, include the records of candid conversations with academics and officials, while project reports and correspondence contain a wealth of detail on the nature of research being undertaken.

The Rockefeller Foundation's Social Sciences Division (SSD) was created in the interwar period in order to channel support towards problem-oriented research. While the RF had previously offered broad support to fund entire departments or colleges as part of a general effort to boost academic production, its new incarnation aimed rather to address contemporary problems. In the 1930s, this often meant dealing with the consequences of the Depression; by the late 1940s/early 1950s, priorities had shifted to understanding totalitarian regimes, managing complex modern societies, and analysing human behaviour.⁵ In Europe, there was also a need to rebuild academic departments that had been depleted or effectively closed during the war years. RF officers often believed that British universities lagged behind US ones, and that they could benefit from an injection of US expertise and dynamism.

There was a feeling amongst officers in the Division that sociology was the discipline that they should prioritise in Britain. Joseph Willits, director of the SSD, circulated a memo in early 1948, for example, noting that, "When I was in England in 1946, I was met everywhere with the strong urge that Britain has plenty of economists but no sociologists worthy of the name....There is no development that parallels the striking strength among the young group that has arisen in this country [the US]."⁶

Sociology, along with neighbouring disciplines such as social anthropology, social psychology and social medicine, therefore received support from the Rockefeller Foundation in the post-war period, especially in the early 1950s. In Britain in the 1950s, grants in the social sciences were made to the London School of

Economics, the Tavistock Institute, the Social Medicine Research Unit, Nuffield College Oxford, and the Institute of Race Relations, among others.

Grants often took the form of fellowships, which enabled scholars to put together programmes of travel to visit academics and institutions in their field in other countries, primarily in the US. US social scientists were also sent to British institutions as visiting fellows to share their knowledge and build up skills in fields in which the US was seen as more cutting-edge, such as sociology. The documentation for one grant made to send a sociologist from the University of Chicago to Nuffield College Oxford included the observation that, “[t]he most effective means of establishing this discipline [sociology] is believed to be the importation of distinguished sociologists from the United States...to introduce the subject, launch research, and train British scholars.”⁷

A further way in which the Rockefeller Foundation sought to promote academic ties between British and US academics was through its funding for professional societies. For example, in 1956 it gave a grant to the British Sociological Association (BSA) to pay for the invitation of a guest speaker from the US to its annual meeting. After the event, the head of the BSA wrote to the SSD noting that, “I really do feel that – because of your assistance...we managed to make a firm and successful beginning for future interchange and cooperation between sociologists of our two countries; and we shall do our best to develop this good beginning.”⁸ Yet, as Martin Bulmer has recently pointed out, US sociology had surprisingly little influence on the British field, and vice versa.⁹ British sociologists, indeed, were not always as impressed with what they found in the United States, as Rockefeller Foundation officers had apparently been expecting. After interviewing two sociologists from the University of London at the end of a tour of US sociology departments, Leland DeVinney of the SSD noted that they were:

...very disappointed with the present status of Sociology in this country [the US]. They are convinced that sociological theory, in any conventional sense, is virtually non-existent. They are mainly distressed, however, because, in their view, American sociologists are too much devoted to developing tools for research and too little

interested in important sociological problems on which research should be done.¹⁰

Indeed, British sociology in the post-war period would increasingly focus on the study of everyday life and attempt to deploy its methods to understand social change and shifting ideas of identity within the country.¹¹

In contrast to sociology, social and cultural anthropology was largely out of favour within the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1950s. Responding to a request from the University of Oxford's Social Anthropology Department in 1950, the RF's associate director for the social sciences, Norman Buchanan, apologised for the negative response, noting that, "We have not done anything in social anthropology since the war...several other fields of activity are strong competitors."¹² The following year, in a record of a meeting with the University of Manchester's Social Anthropology Department, Joseph Willits, director of the SSD, noted that he had informed them about the Rockefeller Foundation's "hesitation about financing a lot more studies of ancient cultures – and the feeling that the techniques of anthropology should be used to study various aspects of present societies."¹³

Indeed, this interest in applying anthropological techniques to 'modern' society was often expressed by Rockefeller Foundation officers and their consultants. Carl Hovland, a psychologist at Yale, prepared a memo on 'Some Suggested Research Opportunities in Social Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology' for Joseph Willits in 1946, while working as a consultant for the SSD. His primary recommendation in this memo was that the department should support research that sought to apply anthropological techniques to modern societies, noting that, "the most significant and exciting development in anthropology during the last ten years has been the application of anthropological...techniques originally used exclusively with primitive people to make a more objective and systematic analysis of our society [i.e. the US]."¹⁴ In particular, he suggested funding research that encouraged collaboration between anthropologists and sociologists or psychologists, whose more quantitative techniques could help bring scale to anthropology's focus on small groups. However, reviewing the funding applications submitted by British anthropology departments in the 1950s, there

is little evidence of such an approach. Instead, the majority of anthropological requests for funding related to relatively traditional anthropological studies of small communities in Britain's current and former colonies, or to physical anthropology projects such as blood group studies.

These competing ideas of what academic disciplines should be and do point to the fluid boundaries between sociology and anthropology – and competition between the two fields – that marked the post-war period in British academia.¹⁵ While the expansion in higher education in this period led to an increased number of academic positions in sociology, these were sometimes filled by anthropologists.¹⁶ Indeed, British-based academics and departments in this period had to navigate a fragmented and unreliable funding landscape, competing for resources on a regular basis. The Rockefeller Foundation records also include numerous occasions on which academics complain to their officers about their lack of access to funding. Willits, for example, met with representatives of Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1946 who complained about being dependent on the British Government's University Grants Committee (UGC) for money – they wanted a more secure and independent source of income, which they perceived the Rockefeller Foundation to be.¹⁷

In addition to this perception that the UK government's central funding for higher education was insufficient and unreliable, a number of British-based academics whose work focused on the British colonies, were also feeling additional pressure. A grant made to the University of Cambridge's Social Anthropology Department in 1950 for a study of India noted that, "There is understandable reluctance on the part of such Institutes to depend on such [British Colonial Office] aid exclusively, lest they become too dependent on the Colonial Office and too completely limited to British overseas territories."¹⁸ Britain's Colonial Social Science Research Council itself had only limited money to spend on research and the majority of this was channelled through social science research institutes set up in British colonies in Jamaica, Nigeria, Uganda, Malaysia and Northern Rhodesia.¹⁹ Academics based in British institutions were at the back of that queue.

Ely Devons, an economist at the University of Manchester, explained the situation as he perceived it to Willits in 1951, "As far as we can see, therefore, we shall not

get sufficient money from general University funds to finance the research programmes we have in mind, and if we have to rely on such funds alone, we shall have drastically to curtail these programmes.”²⁰ However, Rockefeller Foundation officers were unwilling to effectively replace the British government as a primary funder of academic research. As Leland DeVinney of the SSD wrote to one applicant in 1952,

A very considerable number of projects throughout England have been launched under the earmarked funds of the University Grants Committee. If all the universities involved are going to take the position that these developments have no claim on university funds in case the earmarking is not repeated, it will obviously be quite impossible for the Foundation to substitute its funds for those of the University Grants Committee in any important fraction of the projects which will thus be left stranded.²¹

The Rockefeller Foundation, of course, did not have an unlimited budget – contrary to what some British applicants sometimes seemed to believe – and many projects were turned down because of doubts about their quality, viability or sustainability.

These various examples suggest that the relationship between US foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and British academics was not straightforward in the 1950s. Nor were US foundations as generous to British scholars as they were to American or even French academics in the same period. However, the rigorous archiving policies of organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation provide a rich source base for historians as the materials which they contain are indicative of the concerns, interests and attitudes of a range of individuals and organisations. While funding applications obviously do not tell the whole story of knowledge creation in the social sciences, they offer some insight into the compromises and negotiations at play as scholars attempted to secure resources. Instead, my research suggests that telling the story of the British social sciences in the postwar period necessarily involves a consideration of how members of this field interacted with colleagues and patrons in the United States, but also that these interactions should not be viewed only through a prism of Cold

War politics, but as part of a broader effort of intellectual exchange and the building and securing of networks and alliances.

¹ Robert A. Paul, 'Colonialism, Capital, and the Rise of the Structural-Functionalist School of British Anthropology', *History and Anthropology* 27:2 (2016): 210–229.

² Inderjeet Parmar, 'American Foundations and the Development of International Knowledge Networks', *Global Networks* 2:1 (2002): 13–30.

³ Mark Solovey, 'Cold War Social Science: Specter, Reality or Useful Concept?', in *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, ed. Mark Solovey and Hamilton Cravens (New York; Basingstoke, 2014).

⁴ For example, University of Manchester Special Collections, Vice Chancellor's Files, VCA 7 357, Faculty of Economic and Social Studies records.

⁵ Darwin H. Stapleton, 'Joseph Willits and the Rockefeller's European Programme in the Social Sciences', *Minerva* 41:2 (2003): 101–14.

⁶ Joseph Willits Memo, February 10, 1948, Folder 545, Box 62, Series 401, SG 1.2, Projects, Sub-Series 401.S, England – Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

⁷ Grant in Aid to University of Chicago, May 22, 1953, Folder 545, Box 62, Series 401, SG 1.2, Projects, Sub-Series 401.S, England – Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

⁸ Ronald Fletch to Leland DeVinney, August 9, 1957, Folder 465, Box 53, Series 401.S England – Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

⁹ Martin Bulmer, 'Anglo-America: The Case of Edward Shils, Sociologist, 1910-1995', in *The History of Sociology in Britain*, ed. Plamena Panayotova, 2019.

¹⁰ Leland DeVinney notes on interview with David and Ruth Glass, August 8, 1957, Folder 483, Box 55, Series 401.S, England – Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹¹ Michael Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² Norman Buchanan to Meyer Fortes, 1 June 1950, Box 66, Folder 581, Subseries 401.S: England - Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹³ Joseph Willits diary entry for 16 June 1951, Officers' Diaries, FA392, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹⁴ Carl Hovland memo to Joseph Willits, May 13, 1946, Box 3, Folder 19, Series 910 – Social Sciences, FA112, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹⁵ George Steinmetz, 'A Child of the Empire: British Sociology and Colonialism, 1940s–1960s', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 49, no. 4 (2013): 353–378.

¹⁶ Martin Bulmer, 'The Development of Sociology and of Empirical Social Research in Britain', in *Essays on the History of British Sociological Research*, ed. Martin Bulmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Joseph Willits diary entry for 16 September 1946, Officers' Diaries, FA392, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹⁸ Grant in Aid to Cambridge University, GA-SS 5078, August 21, 1950, Folder 581, Box 66, Series 401, SG 1.1, Projects, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

¹⁹ David Mills, 'British Anthropology at the end of Empire: The Rise and Fall of the Colonial Social Science Research Council, 1944-1962', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 6, (2002), 161-188.

²⁰ Devons to Willits, January 29, 1951, Folder 1081, Box 62 Series 401, SG 1.1 Projects, FA386b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.

²¹ Leland DeVinney to DV Veale, March 17, 1952, Folder 545, Box 62, Series 401, SG 1.2, Projects, Sub-Series 401.S, England – Social Sciences, FA387b, Rockefeller Foundation records, RAC.