

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SSRC

The Social Science Research Council was founded in 1923 with a mandate to reach across disciplinary and institutional boundaries and bring the best social researchers together to address problems of public concern. Its initial funder, the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Trust, sought to advance scientific knowledge in order to inform social reform, public policy, and practical action. Quality, creativity and usefulness have always been central goals for the Council.

Among the Council's first projects were ground-breaking inquiries into industrial relations, the development of official statistics, business cycles and economic growth. The last two were led by its early chairman, Wesley Clair Mitchell and the future Nobel Prize winner Simon Kuznets, who headed a Council committee for 20 years. The first professional staff member was Robert Lynd, who wrote the 1929 classic *Middletown*. During the same period, the Council sponsored Adolf Berle's and Gardiner Means' *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in Chicago*, Charles Beard's *The Idea of National Interest* and William Fielding Ogburn's introduction of systematic research techniques into the study of social change. The Council also pioneered the study of sociolinguistics and transnational social psychology and, with Bronislaw Malinowski and Robert Redfield playing leading roles, helped to integrate the development of anthropology into interdisciplinary social science. Indeed, the very word "interdisciplinary" was first used at the Council.

Among the most influential interdisciplinary approaches the Council helped to nurture was "area studies" (and with it a more general internationalization of American scholarship). The Council played a central role in bringing together social scientists and humanists to study Africa, East Asia, Eurasia (including the former Soviet Union), Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. As these fields grew better institutionalized in the U.S., the Council focused on expanding participation of scholars from the regions studied. It also worked to nurture social science institutions in less developed countries.

Especially during the decades after World War II, the Council contributed importantly to the growth of quantitative research methods and mathematical models in social science. It helped launch new fields of inquiry such as human development and the life course and revitalize older ones such as urban studies. Council leaders in this period included Herbert Simon, Gardner Lindzey, Clifford Geertz, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Talcott Parsons. Perhaps the most celebrated Council committee of the 1950s and 60s focused on comparative politics, with Gabriel Almond as founding chair. More recently, prominent Council projects have focused on global security and cooperation, international migration, and transformations in higher education and knowledge institutions. New projects address HIV/AIDS, world religion, and transformations in the public sphere.

The Council is defined not by its work on any one topic, nor by any one specific disciplinary combination. Indeed, in different projects it often brings social scientists together with humanists, behavioral scientists, natural scientists, biomedical researchers and technologists. Its distinctive niche is to innovate and incubate, to identify emergent lines of research of critical social importance that will be enhanced by interdisciplinary or international ties, and to help scattered researchers build networks and nascent fields to achieve critical mass.



Social Science Research Council

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