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Social Sciences, Future Tense

The social sciences are currently under attack, notably from universities and government agencies, who are their primary patrons. Budget restrictions are the immediate impetus behind the attack, as university and government administrators are forced to find weak spots to save money. There is firm evidence of this in the new National Science Foundation budget, which contains no increase for the social sciences.

Senator Proxmire's criticism of exotic social science research might be dismissed as another congressional ritual were it not for echoes in the rhetoric voiced by high-level administrators. There are several forms of that rhetoric. Type 1 avers that social scientists are not studying immediate social problems, which by the accepted division of scientific labor are meant to be within their province. Type 2 stresses an apparent lack of scientific standards in the social sciences by which research findings and generalizations can be validated. Type 3 focuses on the numerous arguments within each of the disciplines and the evident lack of consensus. All add up to an abysmally low appraisal of the social sciences.

It would be foolish to dismiss these criticisms as only a temporary storm. The economic situation is not likely to improve quickly, and pressures for budget cutting can be expected to continue. For another thing, administrators are likely to convince themselves that they are right, thereby committing themselves to force a reorganization of the social sciences. A likely consequence of these forces in the long run may be a leveling of the differences in orientation and perspective that have been the intellectual life of every social science. This could come about partly through a reactive response by social scientists to answer type 3 complaints and partly through the ascendancy of those who will respond to the type 1 complaints as they see scarce funds directed toward certain types of research.

There is no time to try to educate university and government administrators about the real nature of the social sciences. Besides, if we have not succeeded in educating them in the past 25 years we are not likely to succeed in the next few years. Nor will much be gained by counter-arguments that social problems are highly complex, that social scientists are seldom consulted about policy and little interest has been shown in their findings, or that continuing basic research is as necessary for the social as for the other sciences. Most administrators, I suspect, have a self-fulfilling image of the social sciences by which they perceive only those features that support what they already believe.

I propose several countermeasures. First, we do need to take a hard look at our disciplines, as those best informed to determine where we want to go and how best to get there. This does *not* mean trying to force a single mold, and like an oppressed people desperately trying to conform to the image drawn by administrators. Second, we might begin to practice some "democratic centralism," keeping our criticisms within the discipline rather than airing them in public to win supporters to one point of view or another. Outsiders view these without any perspective as serious complaints. Finally, we might begin aggressively to insist on a balanced recognition of what we know and do, an activity that we have heretofore dismissed. It is not often the social scientists who falter in applying the consequences of their research, but rather the high-level administrators themselves who are looking only for modifications that can be applied within existing social forms.—LEONARD REISSMAN, *Chairman, Department of Sociology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853*