

# INTRODUCTION

During the weeks following its founding in early spring of 1907, the Russell Sage Foundation did something that established it as a kind of unofficial keeper of the larger philanthropic idea. The foundation trustees invited critical comment from various academics and social policy intellectuals, not so much on the particulars of its yet-to-exist program as on the underlying concept of creating knowledge for “social betterment.” In the ensuing decades, the foundation would make philanthropy the topic of full-fledged research programs. But it is to that original question, and in that original spirit, that my historical inquiry is cast. Its aim is to look to the past to understand the nature of the most important challenge facing that original philanthropic idea today.

At the heart of that idea was the core and enduring conviction that rational, scientific understanding of society and its problems is both a sign and an instrument of purposeful social advance.<sup>1</sup> The role of scientific research, as envisioned at the Russell Sage Foundation, would be to transcend personal bias, ideology, and partisan political interest to shape and inform reasoned public debate. In promoting the advancement of knowledge, private philanthropy in turn would serve not its own but an objective, discernible public interest. Equally important at the outset, the pursuit of knowledge would itself be anchored in the hope of resolving the prevailing “social question” of the day.

The concept of the social question in 1907 was very much tied to the exploited condition of labor. In fact, it was fluid enough to be able to encompass a series of questions and problems—the urban problem, the poverty problem, Henry Demarest Lloyd’s problem of “Wealth Against Commonwealth,” W.E.B. Du Bois’s great problem of the “color line”—that all pointed to a fundamental disparity between social and economic conditions and political democracy. As such, the social question was a powerful metaphor for a wide array

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of social problems, and, at the Russell Sage Foundation, a way of organizing its philanthropic work.

Thus, at its founding—an era of vast economic and social inequalities and a deepening ideological and political divide—the Russell Sage Foundation would look to social research as an essential instrument in the work of ameliorative social reform. The content of that work would be heavily empirical, but its framing of the issues would be ideological as well as practical. In this instance, it would carve out the boundaries of a diversified, often internally conflicted “new liberalism” within the vast space between *laissez-faire* and socialist extremes.<sup>2</sup> As a first order of business, it would take hold of and reframe the social question to emphasize its roots in objective social and economic conditions that were themselves amenable to reform. It was this effort to, in effect, socialize the social question that most consistently linked the new philanthropy to the progressive as well as the longer new liberal reform tradition, and that would eventually draw it into the orbit of the New Deal.

Later, taking a new approach to the social question, the Russell Sage Foundation would remake itself. It would do so within an emerging tradition of philanthropic knowledge-building that, in the context of cold war and widening postwar affluence, became increasingly detached from the immediacy of reform politics and the social question, even as its ambitions for social science grew. Although couched once again in the neutralizing language of advancing knowledge and promoting the public interest, these ambitions were keyed to the needs of post-World War II liberalism, now struggling to construct a political and ideological program that would reconcile its incomplete commitments to racial justice and economic security with the global crusade against communism.<sup>3</sup> Philanthropy would contribute to this project of reconciliation with a massive expansion of theoretical and applied research. The theoretical was to focus on behavioral and cultural theories of democracy, social stratification, and economic modernization; the applied on reducing social problems to containable root causes that could in turn be resolved through existing institutions of civil society, the private market, and—most of all—enlightened government policy.

Of course, in claiming theirs to be an apolitical, nonideological purpose, foundations were exercising a degree of political and ideological control, not in the least by treating key tenets of the so-called liberal consensus as beyond ideological contention, but especially by circumscribing the boundaries of public debate. For this, they would come under persistent criticism, and calls for federal regulation, from both the McCarthyite right and the social democratic left. Meanwhile, philanthropic influence would be more visibly reflected in the vast institutionalization of ideologically neutral expertise in policy think tanks and government agencies, and in the politics of knowledge that established their empirical, problem-solving approach as the dominant mode of policy and policy-relevant social scientific research. Though dwarfed by the expansion of federal contracts and research funding, foundations continued to serve as a kind of linchpin in the postwar liberal research and policy establishment.

Now, in an era once again marked by growing inequality and a deep political and ideological divide, this philanthropic tradition finds itself in a state of uncertainty, if not crisis, as it confronts the challenges of a world “turned rightside up.”<sup>4</sup> One major challenge is the prospect of its own political and cultural irrelevance. This prospect is occasioned equally by the rise of the ideological right—with its denigration of big government, its hostility to the idea of an independent public purpose, its increasingly blatant subordination of science to a combination of corporate interest and Christian fundamentalist faith, and its revival of such once-presumed settled battles in the scientific culture wars as the teaching of Darwinian evolution—and by the seemingly permanent demise of liberalism as a viable political ideology. A second challenge is the relentless rise of economic, social, and political inequality since the 1980s, and its virtual absence, despite reams of social research documenting the dimensions and consequences of growing inequality, as an issue in public debate. Third, and what brings the others most directly into focus, is the growing power and influence of an entirely alternative, explicitly conservative, philanthropic tradition, and the self-consciously “counterrevolutionary” research and policy estab-

lishment it has helped to create. These challenges, and what they mean for the tradition of philanthropy and social research the Russell Sage Foundation represents, are the subject of this book.

## **What This Book Is About**

*Social Science for What?* is a historical inquiry into the early roots of the philanthropic project of creating social science in the public interest and the more recent transformations that now confront it with a challenge to its founding premises. As suggested by its partly but deliberately borrowed title, the book is a critical inquiry into a much-needed debate about whether and how this philanthropic project is capable of meeting its self-appointed responsibilities at a critical moment for social knowledge and for liberal democracy. As befitting the occasion of the Russell Sage Foundation's centenary, it is also meant as an invitation to revisit longstanding debates over questions of value and neutrality in socially purposeful social scientific research.

The source of the title is, of course, Robert Lynd's classic *Knowledge for What?* a book rightly renowned as a classic of American social thought and social science, and a call for socially engaged research.<sup>5</sup> Writing in the 1930s amid the global crises of war, totalitarianism, and economic collapse, Lynd issued an impassioned plea for a more fully relevant social knowledge, a knowledge willing to cut through the reigning mythology and prejudices of American culture—among which Lynd included the myths of equal opportunity, free market individualism, and the self-regulating market—to clear the way for enlightened social change. He also issued a warning about the dangers of a social science trapped within the confines of narrow empiricism and overly abstracted theory, and sheltered behind the veil of neutral scholarly detachment. Such a science, he argued, was both all too willing to accept prevailing definitions of social problems and incapable of questioning prevailing social norms. Such a science was failing to meet its broader responsibilities—at a moment when what society needed more than anything was a fearless and penetrating inquiry into the viability of its most cherished, but outdated, values and institutions.

By invoking Lynd in our own, albeit far different, historical moment, I wish to emphasize the urgency of the issues that philanthropy and social research now face. I also wish to underscore the degree to which those issues are rooted in deep-seated historical conflicts, over the value and indeed the scientific validity of strict neutrality in social scientific research, and over the struggle to envision and create a more genuinely democratic knowledge. I aim to underscore the degree to which the current crisis is cultural as well as political and ideological, involving, as it does, ongoing conflict over the cultural orientation of American society—and whether it needs or is even subject to change.

I highlight these themes in the first two chapters of the book, where I locate the historical origins of the philanthropic project in a far different, more explicitly purposive and reformist vision of social science than the one we have grown familiar with today. That vision was most fully embodied in the early Russell Sage Foundation and in the pathbreaking research it initiated with the famous Pittsburgh Survey and in a substantial body of original research through the Great Depression. I then turn to consider and revisit the highly contested debates that accompanied the eventual eclipse of that original Progressive-era vision, and that came to a height with the publication of Lynd's *Knowledge for What?* (1939) and Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Once again, the course of the early reform vision was captured by the Russell Sage Foundation, which in 1947 announced a fundamental shift in emphasis from social reform to social science.

I am equally concerned, however, with what is historically distinctive about the current challenges, and with whether philanthropy and social research as currently constituted are capable of an effective response. I thus shift gears in the second part of the book to offer an interpretive narrative of the historical rise of the conservative research and policy establishment starting in the immediate post-World War II years, emphasizing its roots in an alternative philanthropic tradition as well as an alternative, distinctively conservative tradition of social knowledge and political philosophy.

As I show in chapters 3 through 5, four aspects distinguish this as an alternative philanthropic tradition. First is its belief that

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philanthropy should be both ideological and forthright about its ideological commitments—to economic and cultural conservatism, and to the not always compatible values of limited government, free-market capitalism, individualism, and traditional (Victorian) virtue. Second, and related, is its advocacy of a reform program based on the similarly conflicted principles of extreme economic deregulation and heightened moral regulation—in particular for poor and otherwise socially marginalized groups. Third, and indeed what binds the internally conflicting strands of this reform agenda, is right-wing philanthropy's insistence on desocializing as well as moralizing the social question—in the sense of holding individuals personally responsible for their disadvantages—and on the personally redemptive power of free markets in the necessarily moral response. Fourth is its engagement in what conservatives often refer to as the war of ideas, but is more accurately described as a sustained attack on the so-labeled liberal, nominally nonideological research and policy establishment and its nominally nonideological philanthropic sponsors.

My narrative traces how these overlapping commitments have come together over the past three decades in the form of an organized movement to build a foundation-funded conservative “counterintelligentsia” based on a strategy memorably described by former Treasury Secretary William Simon as to provide “grants, grants and more grants in exchange for books, books and more books.”<sup>6</sup> Along with other central themes, it highlights the importance of formerly left-liberal neoconservative intellectuals in this philanthropic countermovement, and of their attention to the cultural as well as the political and ideological fronts. Their efforts are very much reflected in the major intellectual achievements outlined in a recent insider's retrospective of three decades of conservative philanthropic activism. Among them are supply-side economics, the law and economics movement, Charles Murray's blueprint for the “end of welfare,” and the galvanizing effect of such missives in the academic culture wars as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*.<sup>7</sup> Such inroads are but a part of the sweeping reconfiguration of the policy research and advocacy landscape that has occurred over the past three

decades, with the emergence of a wide network of richly endowed conservative “advocacy tanks.”<sup>8</sup>

If all of these highlight the blatantly oppositional nature of the right-wing philanthropic movement, I also focus on its successful introduction of a characteristically conservative kind of knowledge into social policy and public debates. What distinguishes this as conservative knowledge is not simply that it is driven by ideological, partisan concerns, or that it is associated with conservative institutes and think tanks. Rather, it is that the knowledge stems from a fundamentally different philosophy of knowledge, only recently associated with the University of Chicago philosopher Leo Strauss, and what conservatives consider to be unimpeachable truths. On the one hand is the idea that civilized society works according to certain universal standards of human behavior and morality that transcend both place and time. On the other is that social “pathologies” stem from bad behavior, from culturally “relativist” attitudes, and especially from permissive liberal policies that have encouraged broad cultural decay. This is not the kind of knowledge that can be derived from empirical inquiry. Although frequently couched in the conventions of empirical social science, it is both suspicious and subversive of the empirical, philosophically pragmatic, morally (in conservatives’ eyes) relativist tradition of liberal policy research.<sup>9</sup> It is instead drawn from ideas that conservatives treat as objective, established fact: about the superiority of free market capitalism, the two-parent patriarchal family, and ancient and Victorian-era virtues (a term they prefer over *values* because it conveys less contingency and more of an air of objective reality).<sup>10</sup>

Using one illustration of the distinctive nature and growing power of conservative social knowledge, I focus in chapter 4 on the role of such knowledge in the 1970s and in the precursor to the welfare reform debate. For one thing, Charles Murray and other analysts associated with conservative think tanks have proved entirely willing to use statistical manipulation and factual distortion to suit their ideological purposes, even while seeming to participate in the numbers-crunching and data-mining that is common currency in the trade. But the more basic point is that, despite claims to the contrary, they do not accept the seemingly neutral idea that knowledge

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based on empirical research should inform policy decisions. Instead, they seek to engage the issues on the altogether different plane of ideas and principles that lie beyond the reach of evidentiary exposition.<sup>11</sup> In the end, the lack of statistical evidence that welfare payments promote single motherhood does not matter. What does matter is that welfare tolerates single motherhood by softening the economic hardship that single motherhood otherwise would—and in a moral society should—impose. Or, as Murray puts it in one of many Malthusian descriptions of the evil of welfare, it “enables women to bear children without the natural social restraints.”<sup>12</sup> Empirical social science, by seeking to resolve a moral issue based on statistical evidence, actually obscures a higher truth: that society should not be subsidizing the evil of unwed motherhood. As the example of welfare shows, then, the standard of conservative knowledge is not empirical rigor or soundness, but adherence to higher truth. Social policy is not the only thing that needs to be remoralized. Social knowledge does as well.

A final, key point I make in discussing the distinctive nature of conservative social and policy knowledge centers on the purposes it is meant to serve: not so much those of investigation and pragmatic problem-solving as those of movement building. This is reflected in the emphasis on values and on core, unifying ideas, and in the highly effective idea-marketing strategies for which the right has been renowned. It is reflected as well in the use of ideas—literally—as weapons in the policy and culture wars. But it is perhaps most fully manifest in the degree to which conservative knowledge focuses on providing the movement with a usable past, an account of the origins of a wide range of contemporary social policy problems based on a simplistically coherent, highly distorted, endlessly repeated narrative that holds not only Great Society but also the whole of twentieth-century liberalism responsible for an era of economic decline and cultural dissolution dating from the 1960s, all in anticipation of the immanent triumph of ascendant conservatism.

I conclude part II with a discussion of the substantial progress that conservative philanthropy has made in the crusade to establish what we might call a more faith-based, movement-oriented social knowledge. Such progress is abundantly clear in the veritable



beachhead of tightly networked foundations, think tanks, and values-oriented research institutes established around the country in recent years.<sup>13</sup> It is also clear in the extent to which the language and categories of conservative social knowledge have become institutionalized in the public sector as well as in public debate, as evidenced by the proliferation of federally sponsored marriage and family values initiatives, along with the several offices of faith-based and community initiatives in the White House and in federal, state, and intergovernmental bureaucracies. These and other right-wing triumphs speak as much to the effectiveness of the broader conservative coalition as they do to the effectiveness of its philanthropic branch.

My account, however, also attributes the growing power and influence of conservative philanthropy to the corresponding incapacitation of its more centrist as well as its progressive-liberal counterparts. Perhaps most telling in this regard are the lengths to which historically liberal and nominally nonideological foundations and think tanks have gone to accommodate, and in the process to empower, conservative social knowledge in the postwelfare debate, as the inclusion of Charles Murray in a recent Brookings volume and a number of other efforts to ensure ideological balance in research and policy analysis suggest.<sup>14</sup> These balancing acts are justified as efforts to be fair-minded in laying out and airing the key issues for debate. In reality, and especially in the case of welfare, they have done more to validate the conservative reform agenda and skew how the issues are formulated to the right. In the first place, they have unquestioningly adopted conservative categories of analysis—dependency, self-sufficiency, illegitimacy—as if these categories have no moral or ideological content. Second, even when they acknowledge their differences on specific issues, the admittedly liberal contributors to these projects fail to engage conservative values and ideological premises in any critical way. Instead, they assess the so-labeled higher truths posited by conservative positions exclusively on empirical grounds. Third, in presenting theirs as a comprehensive airing of the issues, they have effectively marginalized, if not silenced, significant critical voices, along with the issues—entitlement, rights, caregiving work, economic jus-

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tice—that have been raised outside a highly circumscribed set of policy options.

I conclude by returning to themes and debates discussed in the first part of the book, to outline a more socially purposive approach to research that respects the principle of open-minded, unbiased inquiry, that acknowledges the values behind its research commitments and priorities, and that uses those values to both reframe old questions and ask new ones. Here I focus on drawing insights (which is not to say direct lessons or strategies to be imitated) not, as others have, from the conservative counterrevolution, but (and more important) from the earlier, progressive approach to philanthropy and research. Once again echoing Robert Lynd, I end by discussing the role of philanthropy in knowledge that reframes the social question and looks beyond elite circles to the broader society. Although I offer answers, my aim in raising these questions is to engage in a necessarily collective, more inclusive conversation about what a more democratic and socially relevant approach to knowledge looks like, and how we begin to get there from here.