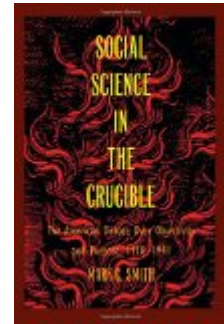


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark C. Smith. *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918-1941*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1994. 353 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8223-1484-3 \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1497-4.

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## Exhibited Decisions

Mark Smith has chosen to focus upon the professional lives of five male social scientists as a way of explaining what happened in this sector of US scholarship during the years 1918-1941. He has conducted extensive archival research on the careers of Wesley Mitchell, Charles Merriam, Robert Lynd, Charles Beard and Harold Lasswell. The refreshing result is five different perspectives in social scientific history during the thirty-three year period under consideration. Smith leads the reader through what can be likened to a meticulously designed museum exhibit with a wide variety of biographical artefacts on display.

The Mitchell chapter represents this economist as driven and obsessed with fact-finding, although the biographical description attempts fairness to a man who did much to improve public awareness of economists and their field. Mitchell's innocence regarding the limitations of statistical procedures and results is highlighted, stemming from his own lack of technical competence, is highlighted. This innocence became problematic when Smith proceeded to generate so-called empirical studies and even became a leading advocate for objectivist methods. So the reader is left with an image of a man who became well-known for something that he knew little about. Yet questions remain regarding Mitchell's ambition. The scant references to his ongoing personal life leave this reviewer frustrated as to the factors influencing many of Mitchell's decisions. His poor childhood is noted and may well have contributed to Mitchell's drive, what forces kept his ambition alive throughout his life?

The chapters on Lynd and Lasswell highlight crises in decision-making. Charting their journeys, Smith has determined that each of these men chose unwisely in ways that haunted them for years. Lynd was a purposive thinker who first chose journalism, then the ministry and finally sociology as careers. In terms of his studies of, for example, advertising and non-Western cultures, Lynd was clearly forward-thinking. Although well-connected through his father (a NYC bank president) Lynd was unable to generate sufficient research funds in order to implement projects as a mature scholar, suggesting that he had made many enemies. Smith seems to have settled upon "feelings of inferiority" as Lynd's tragic flaw. Always vigorously criticizing the assumptions of objectivist thinkers, he struggled to provide a viable alternative. Smith points out that Lynd was ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour. Could his insecurity have held him back? Not enough personal detail is provided in the chapter to lead the reader to such a conclusion.

As for Lasswell, Smith has determined that he "possessed many elements of the chameleon in his personality." (227) Smith uses a comment from one of Lasswell's colleagues as the springboard for his assessment of Lasswell's character structure. That this political psychologist was open to influence is without doubt and this reviewer wonders what is wrong with that. Smith's further suggestion that Lasswell made unconnected shifts in his intellectual perspective remains unfounded. There is insufficient evidence of such disjointedness in the chapter. Lasswell's most complex work relied on what he

called configurative analysis, a method that attempted to embrace many viewpoints. Smith states that he has found Lasswell's analysis confusing and explains how, somewhat. But a chameleon would never attempt to create a unified method drawing together scholarship from so many different fields. While no one theory can adequately address all cases, an integrative approach always has some merit. Each attempt at integration is a step in the process of developing ever more viable social sciences. Although Smith seems to know this at some level (otherwise he would not have written such a book) he has not given Lasswell his due in this regard.

Anyone who thinks that social scientists are of a particular breed, that there is a certain fixed category or type, will be surprised by the chapters on Merriam and Beard. In these two chapters Smith presents the reader with two professional lives that could not have been more diametrically opposed.

Charles Merriam was a political theorist at the University of Chicago who tried to be all things to all people. Like Mitchell, he believed that there was magic in quantitative methods yet (worse than Mitchell) he had not even mastered them at an elementary level. Merriam ran for mayoral office and lost, even though he insisted that "social scientists must be completely apolitical." (84) Merriam, as presented by Smith, did more to bring politics into social science than anyone else in his day. He fabricated a consensus among social scientists and spoke with authority about the power of empiricism so as to impress officials who had access to research funds. He naively believed that categories once generated could explain and predict social and cultural phenomena. This belief helped him in his fund-raising work, at which he was very successful. Merriam was very good at chatting up the powerful. He gained access to ludicrous amounts of money. But he would not or could not listen to people whose views differed from his own. Unfortunately he could only see the brilliant Charles Beard as a thorn in his side and not as someone who could have helped Mitchell to refine his own thinking.

Chapter Five of the book is about Beard. It reads very well, having been written out of obvious admiration for a gutsy, confident, prolific scholar. Smith's Beard accomplished a number of superhuman feats. He became president of both the American Political Science and American Historical Associations. He founded a labour college in England. He resigned from Columbia University's faculty in order to do "emancipated thinking." (174) He was honest and direct. After 1921, Beard did research with his

own money in order to control analyses and recommendations. Charles Beard ran his own dairy farm, and he wrote forty-nine books. Larger than life? No. Smith asserts that even Beard had weaknesses (yet those of a personal nature are not divulged). Smith considers Beard's intellectual weakness to have been situated in his consistent and tremendous vagueness in the area of values. Apparently this is painfully clear in *The Rise of American Civilization*, which Beard co-authored with his wife Mary. "The Beards' chief problem was their inability to state their values in any explicit fashion." (191) Somewhat like Merriam, Beard had had a staunch upbringing by Quaker parents in Indiana. Merriam's adult response was a pietistic approach to objectivist political science. All who disagreed were sinners. Beard acted on his conscience and strove for higher goals but he was always open to debate. Smith pinpoints Beard's idealism as an important aspect of his values. Later in life Beard evidently became bitter and could not write himself out of the bitterness because he could not articulate his taken-for-granted ideals.

In the introduction this reviewer mentioned having a sense of Smith's book as a museum exhibit. The reader is led through the exhibit, from one display to the next, with carefully chosen artefacts explained in a sequence. As in most public exhibits, the curator's criteria of selection and associated influences remain invisible to spectators. Such is the case with curator Mark Smith. Why were these five men in particular chosen? Smith states in the introduction that he was a social worker for a time, but now he teaches at Texas at Austin. This reviewer assumes that his interest in how these five men balanced research, teaching, social action and government work stems from Smith's own professional decisions. It seems rather curious that he does not discuss this or other pivotal experiences (his childhood, his religious background), since his historical approach indicates a deep sensitivity to problems of authorial bias.

*Social Science in the Crucible* is very well researched and multi-layered. Influences consistently mentioned throughout the book are Veblen and Dewey. An interesting subtext of this work has to do with various interpretations that were brought to bear upon these two thinkers.

This reviewer has three criticisms of Smith's book. First of all, the back cover promises "an intensive study of the work and lives of major figures." This should be amended to read "the work lives," since precious little is unveiled about their ongoing personal lives. Secondly, there is a gaff in Chapter One that is offensive to this

Canadian reviewer. Smith states that Mackenzie King was a "former Canadian labor minister." (26) William Lyon Mackenzie King was also the longest serving Prime Minister in Canadian history. It's like referring to Roosevelt by saying that he was governor of New York.

Finally, Smith yearns for a moral social science. In order for it to be moral it must be useful. By usefulness I take him to mean that social scientists should try to find workable solutions to societal problems. He seems to be operating out of a mechanical or traditional medical model -as if any given society were an entity that could be fixed through some type of expert intervention. Such a perspective has been challenged by critical theorists and poststructuralists, who have cajoled/vexed us into reshaping our questions in order to further (and better) refine our thinking. Smith's book is about thirty-three years of social scientific activity in the United States earlier in this century. This reviewer did not anticipate being confronted with Smith's cursory dismissal of contemporary theoretical movements in the final two pages

of his conclusion. It seems ironic that Smith would spend 266 pages carefully documenting debates and influences within and upon the social sciences spanning thirty-three years, yet only two pages alluding (in an extremely negative fashion) to some movements that have generated changes in the social sciences over the past fifty years. I say "some of the movements" because feminism has been avoided altogether.

Perhaps Mark Smith thinks that he was born too late. He has spent a great deal of time getting to know five men who are no longer living, yet each of whom he treats as a worthy colleague. Smith obviously enjoys these textual colleagues who lived in a very different time. He has in a sense recreated their time through their decisions. Yet if these same men could return to live among us today, they would have very different decisions to make.

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