The Social Science Research Council: 75 Years Young

by Paul B. Baltes*

The last time the Council celebrated an anniversary was 25 years ago, on the occasion of its 50th birthday. Birthdays of institutions are different from birthdays of people, and the difference carries important meaning. Beyond age 30 or so, we as individuals want to be younger, and this desire for youth increases with age. Besides, the lifetime of individuals has definite limits! When these limits are reached, living longer becomes an exception to the rule.

A vignette from history illustrates the point. Close to 250 years ago, Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757) was the permanent secretary (secrétaire perpetuelle) of the French Academy. One day Fontenelle, who lived to the ripe age of 99, was sitting in the Academy together with a much younger colleague, a mere 89 years old. This friend turned to Fontenelle and asked worriedly, “Why do you think we are getting so old? Could it be that the Almighty has simply forgotten us, that God does not know that we are still around?” Fontenelle, known for his cynical humor and practical wisdom, whispered, “Shhh, shhh, dear colleague, not so loud!”

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The situation is very different for institutions. Their lives in a way are limitless, thus they can be loud and clear where their age is concerned. The older, the better, since longer tradition makes for prestige, health and influence. They stand on the shoulders of many and the many reach across generations. Regarding institutions, there is the potential of eternity. In this sense, at age 75 the Council is young.

That institutions can have a much longer life than individuals is one of the reasons why in the end, the social and cultural is so powerful, perhaps more so than the individual. Aside from the genome, institutions are the primary carriers of the fabric of the human condition and the dynamics of continuity and change. For a psychologist such as myself to reach such insight into the significance of the social-cultural-institutional is perhaps a rarity. That I am able to do so is due foremost to my experience in the Council and its spirit of interdisciplinarity. My asso-
ciation with the Council has helped me to think beyond the single-person paradigm of mainstream behavioral science.

The ritual of this anniversary requires me say a few words about the raison d'être of the Council. Four activities shape the profile of the Council as I see and have experienced it.

**Pure, Applied and Action Research**

First, the founders of the Council placed its squarely at the intersection of science, society and social reform. Operationally, this can be interpreted in various ways. One interpretation is that the Council since its inception has been and remains committed to joining the pure with the applied or action-oriented in social science work. Associated with this emphasis is an important function of encouraging communication between the social sciences and the private and public sectors. In this spirit, the Council has more than once been a meeting place of diverse minds and interest groups who from their respective vantage points aspire to make the world a better place.

Consequently, the Council is subject to pulls and pushes in alternative directions by the trends of fashion in the academic world and by the ever-changing political issues of the day, as well as those of other institutions that are in the business of social analysis and social reform. It is not easy to respect these often incompatible demands and at the same time to pursue a coherent program aimed at the advancement of the social sciences and the public good. We ask our institutional peers, supporters and stakeholders to continue to help us in this regard, and to ensure that the conditions of financial support do not separate us from the core of the social sciences as its fields develop. Only by continuing to attract the best of academia to its work can the Council achieve its objective; that is, to explore how social science-based knowledge can be brought to bear on matters of public concern.

**Methodological and theoretical innovations**

Throughout its history, the Council has made a second topic part of its signature profile: the frontiers of methodological advances and social-science theory. Indeed, the Council's record on that score is impressive, covering such diverse topics as the role of mathematics in the social sciences, methods of survey research, methods of qualitative and hermeneutic analysis, social indicators and the role of ethics in the planning and conduct of research.

At its 75th birthday, I urge the Council to continue its efforts to be in the center of social-science methodology and theory construction. Currently, for instance, the Council is grappling with the challenge presented by modern technologies of genetics and neuroscience. Has the time come to inform the social sciences better about how a close collaboration between social scientists and neuroscientists might open new doors towards understanding such issues as the life course, aging, gender, social class or education? Similarly, on the topic of genetics and gene technology, the social sciences occasionally appear to take a hands-off position. One reason, from an international point of view, is that American discussions surrounding the genome-behavior-society interface are unfortunately completely locked into issues of race.

But the methodological and theoretical challenge is not limited to the intertwining of the life sciences with the social sciences. It also involves seemingly oppositional methodological and theoretical approaches within the social sciences. Think only of the negative dynamics surrounding current discussions of hermeneutics and deconstruction. Rather than exploiting the opportunities for humanists and empiricists to shed their respective lights on institutions and behavior, scholars have allowed deep canyons to open between them. Departments are breaking up because the faculty was not able to talk productively across methodologies.

At such junctures, the Council has a special role. Its longstanding tradition qualifies it to transcend disciplinary biases and isolation. For instance, many social scientists think that the modern age of biology produces another hegemony, that of biological determinism. For the most part, however, biologists themselves do not believe that at all. On the contrary, during the last decades biologists and neuroscientists have opened their minds more than ever to the powerful role of environmental, behavioral and social factors in gene expression. They are interactionists to begin with. Yet many social scientists believe the opposite, largely because they are underinformed and reluctant to engage themselves.

Thus, the more we learn about the human genome, the more we need to have a good social science in
place to promote the kind of transdisciplinary collaboration that spells progress. The discourse between the biological and the social-cultural is a dialectic, where the social sciences are challenged more than ever. Biologists are naive when it comes to the measurement of the social and cultural. They need our expertise in measuring behavior, in identifying methods that permit quantification of the micro- and macroenvironments in which we humans live. These are the kind of opportunities that the Council seeks out to fulfill its responsibility as one of the premier institutions in the making of the theory and methodology of the social sciences.

**Interdisciplinarity**

The third cornerstone, and historically perhaps the foundational one, in the profile of the SSRC is interdisciplinarity. Keep in mind that the charter of the Council was framed by collaboration among seven scientific organizations. When creating the Council, these organizations recognized that the institutional structure of science and scholarship favors disciplinarity. Yet problems in the world are not organized that way. This dynamic continues to provide a special opportunity for the Council.

Let me use myself as an example. I was trained as a psychologist and in my department, the primary goal was to show that, in questions of human behavior, we psychologists knew best. My experience in the Council opened my eyes to alternative views, views that made me respect colleagues and their approaches to the study of behavior and society in fields such as sociology, anthropology, economics, history or political science. For me, this broadening of my mind and my intellectual ecology was a gift from the Council.

This gift from the Council has much worth, to individuals and disciplines as well as institutions of higher learning. Universities, for instance, benefit from the opportunities that the Council offers regarding interdisciplinary training and discourse. The Council often succeeds in connecting scholars across fields and their boundaries in ways that universities are simply not designed to do. I hope the Council will never depart from this principle, the principle of linking disciplines, of generating networks among those who in their home institutions live the lives of disciplinary specialists. And we need to focus in our efforts in both directions—the link to the humanities and the link to the behavioral sciences.

Note also that this effort applies to all levels of training and expertise, graduate to postgraduate, and to the retraining and nurturing of the elders in the academic community. A recently initiated Council program on the structure and function of higher education is one example. Another is the initiative to strengthen the social-science perspective in doctoral training of economists.

**Internationality**

The fourth cornerstone of the Council's architecture is internationality. As a community, American scientists are underinformed about work outside the United States, including Europe. Since its beginning, the SSRC has contributed to overcoming this limitation, and has brought to the United States the best social science that other countries have to offer. At the same time, the Council has played a major role in encouraging social science in other parts of the world. Indeed, among the success stories of the Council are its international programs in area studies and in international comparative analysis. Originally, this was called “Foreign Area Training and Research.” Hundreds if not thousands of young scholars have been assisted and encouraged by the Council in learning about other areas of the world. The beneficiaries included not only the world of learning but also the private and public sectors.

Recently, in the wake of the Council's effort to reexamine its approach to area studies, there has been much discussion about whether the Council is weakening its investment in internationality. I do not believe that the Council’s review and reformulation of its program in area studies was meant to reduce its commitment to internationality; on the contrary. Together with the American Council of Learned Societies, we have put in place a new organizational structure of comparative and area studies work that we believe is innovative and forward-looking. From my experience on the Board, I can unequivocally say that weakening internationality was not and is not part of the Council’s agenda, neither under the former presidency of David Featherman nor that of Kenneth Prewitt.

The issue was a different one. In the tradition of the Council, we also want to stay ahead of the game,
to innovate and demonstrate what evolutionary scientists call adaptive fitness. As a Council, we are interested in exploiting this world-wide emphasis, not only for the public good and the scholars who work as area specialists, but also for the disciplines at large and the more general advancement of the social sciences. Non-area specialists, as someone on the board recently remarked, would like a piece of the action. We need to recognize, therefore, that internationality itself has taken on new perspectives. Not only of interest to those who want to understand specific cultures and localities, it has become a way to live and do science for practically all disciplines.

In this spirit, the Council is making an effort not to abolish one of its prized programs—that is, area studies—but to enrich it, and in addition to entice additional cohorts of scholars to engage themselves more fully in the pursuit of international dimensions of research. Many on the Council’s board believe that our portfolio of international activities needs to be expanded, and that as in the past the Council needs to demonstrate its facility to match organizational structures to intellectual agendas. I believe this dynamic is to be expected if one considers the scope of the scientific organizations that are the founders and intellectual powers of the Council. Aside from the American Historical, Economic and Anthropological societies, there are at least four others who have a stake in the international agenda of the Council. This goal was the reason why the board decided to initiate a new system of committee structures, and we are grateful to the foundations that supported us in this exciting venture. The next years will show that the Council means what it says, that its reach regarding internationality will be enriched and extended, not curtailed.

The Council fundamentally is a collective enterprise. It is made by humans for humans. The best divine interventions the Council expects, therefore, are love, support, hard work and cooperation with our proven institutional coalitions and partners, invisible as these might want to be. The community gathered here makes me hopeful and optimistic about the Council’s chances for continued success. Unlike Bernard de Fontenelle, we ask God not to forget us so that we might continue to live, but you, the audience and the invisible college of the Council, to be with us as we continue to expand the commitments and values of the SSRC in a changing world. While the general profile of the Council continues to stand, its methods and subject matter need to reflect and prefigure the future.