

Intellectuals Flee from Fascism: Rockefeller Support of Social Scientists, 1933-1945

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It is an honor to speak to you today on some aspects of the refugee scholars program of the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1930s and 1940s. It is a particular honor to appear on the same platform with Professor Reiko Maekawa, whose scholarship I have known and appreciated for twenty-five years. I am similarly honored to appear with Professor Roberta Wollons, who was a colleague of mine at Case Western Reserve University. Both Professor Maekawa and Professor Wollons have made outstanding contributions to the field of American Studies, and I have learned much from them.

Today my remarks will cross boundaries of American Studies and global history. I will be telling a story that includes elements of intellectual history, international relations, and the history of philanthropy. I will be describing part of a great intellectual migration in the 20th century that moved the center of gravity of the social sciences in the West from Europe to the United States. That migration occurred as a result of two very powerful phenomena:

- the rise of fascism, which drove intellectuals out of Germany, Italy, Austria, and several central European nations and
- the stimulation of the social sciences by Rockefeller philanthropy, which created a network of support that gave some of those refugees a haven in perilous times.

Understanding the history of the social sciences in the 20th century requires that you consider both phenomena. Equally important for students of American Studies, the intellectual history of the United States in the 20th century was fundamentally altered by those intellectuals who fled from fascism. Every area of knowledge in the United States, including the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, was deeply affected.

I need to begin my remarks today with a brief history of Rockefeller philanthropy as it affected the social sciences. John D. Rockefeller, who became the richest man in United States' history, had made his fortune in the petroleum business, starting in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1860s. In 1880 he created the Standard Oil Corporation, which in a few years controlled 90% of the petroleum refining business in the United States. He systematically crushed all significant competition in an era when there was little government regulation of business practices.

Although he was a ruthless businessman, he was at the same time a very religious man. He was a member of a particular branch of the Christian protestant faith, the Baptists, who believed strongly in giving part of one's earnings to religious purposes. We can trace his habit of giving from the very earliest records we have at the Rockefeller Archive Center. As his income grew, so did his giving, or philanthropy. In 1884 his gifts were so important in firmly establishing the first college for African-American women in the United States that it was named for his wife's family. A decade later he founded the University of Chicago, one of the first research universities in the United States. It soon became one few centers of the study of sociology outside of Europe. In 1901 Rockefeller created the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, now Rockefeller University. It was in only its second year that the famous bacteriologist Hideyo Noguchi joined its staff.

About the time Rockefeller created the institute he began to think globally in regard to his philanthropy. His petroleum business already had become international: he was selling petroleum products in Europe, Russia, China and Japan. Now he and his advisors began to plan for his philanthropy to extend internationally, as well.

In 1913 he created the Rockefeller Foundation, “for the well-being of mankind throughout the world.” Within a few years he had established an endowment of over two-hundred million dollars, which grew rapidly and provided an annual income greater than the national budgets of all but the largest nations. The Rockefeller Foundation therefore could influence every field of human activity in which it chose to play a role, and that eventually included the social sciences.

In 1918, at the urging of his son, John D. Rockefeller Jr., Rockefeller created the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, a foundation originally intended to support social welfare programs. But the officers of the Memorial were disappointed with the educational underpinnings of that field, and by 1923 began to give substantial support to the academic social sciences. In 1928, as part of a general reorganization of the Rockefeller philanthropic organizations, the Memorial was dissolved, and its program of support of the social sciences was taken over by the Rockefeller Foundation. That program continued into the 1950s.

The academic support programs of the Memorial and the Rockefeller Foundation’s social science program in the 1920s and early 1930s were generally of two kinds. One program was the creation or enhancement of scholarly research institutes and university departments in sociology, psychology, political science, economics, anthropology and archeology through substantial grants; the other program was providing fellowships for scholars, usually to travel to other nations to study at institutes or universities that were thought to be outstanding centers.

Usually these were the same institutes and universities that the Memorial or the Foundation was funding. Among these in Europe were: the London School of Economics and the Royal Institute of International Affairs in Britain; in Germany the Deutsche Hochschule für Politik in Berlin, the Institute of Social Sciences at Heidelberg University; in Austria the Institute for Trade-Cycle Research; and the Centre d'Études de Politique Etrangère in France.

It is important to understand that a fellowship often was given in the expectation that the fellow would return to his or her own nation to participate in the creation of a new social science institute or department. In this way advanced social science knowledge would be spread throughout the world.

It is also worth footnoting here that the kind of social sciences favored by Rockefeller philanthropy were those that were scientific in orientation, and not in the 18th and 19th century traditions of philosophy, logic or and description. The modern social sciences were expected to be grounded in research, mathematically constructed, and to reach toward explanatory theories. The Rockefeller Foundation's publications spoke of a "new science of man," and anticipated a future in which humankind's destructive behaviors could be controlled as a result of the research it funded.

Ironically, the Memorial and the Foundation in the 1920s had great expectations for the social sciences in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Italy, and other continental nations that were all too soon convulsed by another war. The officers of both foundations believed that the social, political and economic upheavals of World War I and the early 1920s could be remedied in part by a better understanding of social processes. If well-educated men and women from the social sciences would become leaders of the intellectual life of these

nations, they thought, surely those nations could make more rational and peaceful choices in the future.

Many of the most impressive students and faculty in the social sciences that Foundation supported were Jewish by ethnic heritage. There were multiple reasons why Jews were leaders in the field, but perhaps the three most important were:

- 1) A Jewish cultural tradition of honoring educated persons;
- 2) The opening of German universities to persons of Jewish heritage in 1872, which provided an opportunity for advancement in learned fields when there was deeper discrimination in other areas; and
- 3) Specifically, that the social sciences were a new field, with less competition than traditional fields of law, medicine, and military and government service.

Let me recapitulate the role of the Rockefeller Foundation in Europe early in 1933 as Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. The Rockefeller Foundation had helped to create several institutes and numerous academic departments in the social sciences, and was committed by three-year and sometimes five-year grants to continuing financial support. Many former fellows staffed these institutes and departments; others were scattered in other universities or even government bureaus.

When the legislation that restricted the employment of Jews in government positions, including universities, passed the German Reichstag in April 1933, the Rockefeller Foundation quickly realized that much of a whole generation of scholars that it had supported was out of work. Within months it was clear that not only the Jewish scholars were at risk, but also those who opposed the Nazi regime. They became strangers in their own land. While the Rockefeller Foundation as a whole saw that its investment in research and ideas might disappear; in some

cases the matter was more personal – there was such a lengthy relationship, which included visits, dinners, and personal letters, that the social scientists had become colleagues or friends of the Rockefeller officers.

For many of the affected scholars the only clear option was emigration from Germany. Several organizations were created in Britain and the United States to provide the necessary financial aid for their travel and initial support. But there were limited possibilities for employment, particularly at the depth of the economic depression that gripped the entire world. Here is where the Rockefeller Foundation stepped in. It created a program to give French, British, and American and some other universities grants to provide salaries to the emigrating scholars for one or two years. From 1933 to 1939 this was described as “Special Research Aid for Deposed Scholars”; from 1940 to 1945 it was described as the “Emergency Program for European Scholars.” Approximately 113 social scientists were aided by these programs, out of the total of about 303 scholars aided. Others refugees were helped indirectly by the Foundation: for example, in 1936 the Foundation distributed worldwide a list of 1600 refugee scholars who needed academic placements.

The Rockefeller Foundation carefully selected the scholars that qualified for this support. Most of them came to the United States. Almost all were former fellows and grantees. In other cases the Foundation simply made grants to assist refugees. The Foundation certainly acted from a mixture of motives and attitudes, as one historian has discussed. Some of its staff had anti-Jewish attitudes; others were concerned about the radical politics common to many of the refugees; and few had any interest in actually helping anyone escape from Germany or other areas.¹

It is important to point out that as fascism spread throughout Europe or, as in the case of Italy, became more strident in the 1930s, the intellectual refugee problem expanded and deepened. Then World War II removed most of the remaining safe havens, such as France. So although the refugee list was dominated by the German-Jewish scholars, in the end refugee scholars with Rockefeller connections came from almost every nation.

One example of a later refugee scholar was Etienne Dennery, who in the 1930s was secretary-general of the Centre d'Etudes de Politique Etrangere in Paris, which had had substantial Rockefeller funding.

In June 1940, immediately after the successful German invasion of France, the Foundation offered a Dennery a six month grant "to permit him to come to this country for the purpose of visiting institutions carrying on programs of research in the field of international relations."² The official description of his situation, accompanying the grant action, is as follows:

Prior to the fall of Paris plans had been made for the invitation of M. Etienne Dennery...by the Rockefeller Foundation to come to the United States for the purpose of contacting institutions and individuals interested in the same type of research in the field of international relations which was carried on by the Centre d'Etudes and supported by the Foundation over a period of years. After the fall of Paris M. Dennery escaped to Bordeaux and thence to Lisbon where he now is. He has cabled the New York office of the Foundation that he would like to accept the invitation which had been mentioned to him some weeks before... The officers of the social sciences feel that M. Dennery is one of the scholars in Europe whose entrance to this country should be facilitated because of the contribution he can make to work in this country in the field of international relations. If he returned to France he would be in peril of his life.³

Certainly the Foundation's program has to be credited with transforming numerous areas of American intellectual life, including the social sciences.⁴ Those chosen for the program were so outstanding that after demonstrating their skills and adapting to American academic life during their Rockefeller-funded appointments, almost all of them found permanent positions. Since many of them were relatively young when they left Germany, they influenced American

academic life into the 1960s. And while early on as Jews, many faced discrimination in the United States, which included unwritten quotas on the number of Jews in departments or on faculties. They actually were part of the slow but steady diversification of American universities, which did not take on a certain urgency until the 1960s.

So, in the end, what occurred was a forced intellectual migration, largely from Germany to the United States, which was significantly affected by Rockefeller philanthropy. Through its program in the social sciences the Foundation had created a set of scholarly connections during the ten years before 1933 that were precisely what was needed in order to rescue a leading generation of scholars. And when the crisis came, the Foundation acted effectively. The United States became the beneficiary and the leader in wide areas of the social sciences as a result.⁵

And moreover, a legacy of the emigration of the European social scientists was its contribution to the decline of American isolation. We can return to refugee Etienne Dennerly for a summary of the situation in June 1941 at the end of his year-long Rockefeller-financed tour of the United States:

... far-off America is not always perfectly informed about Europe. Most of the time they have the facts; but their relation and above all their relative importance, is so difficult to grasp at a distance; escape them for the most part.

This thorough knowledge of foreign people is, however, essential to the United States if it wishes to carry out effectively the role which will be theirs in the world in case of the defeat of Hitlerism.⁶

The Foundation responded to this call for deepening understanding of other peoples by funding area studies and studies of totalitarianism.

But the final words of these remarks should focus on the effect of the Rockefeller Foundation's program on the refugee intellectuals themselves. An internal Foundation report on the refugee program, written in 1946, described it this way:

.... In spite of the disruption which war brought to their lives, [the refugee intellectuals] made satisfactory adjustments to their new circumstances and preserved their devotion to their scholarly work as well as to their sanity and good nature. In this program, the Foundation not only insured the continuance of important scholarly work; in many cases, it actually saved distinguished, productive lives from destruction.⁷

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Reinhard Siegmund-Schultze, "Rockefeller Support for Mathematicians Fleeing from the Nazi Purge." In Giuliana Gemelli, editor, *The "Unacceptables": American Foundations and Refugee Scholars between the Two Wars and After*. Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2000, pp. 91-104.

² "Social Sciences Grant in Aid no. RA SS 40, Etienne Dennery," 28 June 1940, folder 569, box 49, series 200, RG 1.1, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (hereafter RFA), Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY, USA.

³ Ibid.

⁴ One may appreciate the irony that the Foundation's support of social scientists in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s was intended to help transform European intellectual life, and resulted in the transformation of *American* intellectual history.

⁵ Others, such as Allan Bloom (in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*) have argued that the refugee intellectuals, many of whom were politically liberal in their views, "for decades, had spoilt the youth entrusted to them." Claus-Dieter Krohn, "American Foundations and Refugee Scholars Between the Two Wars." In Giuliana Gemelli, editor, *The "Unacceptables": American Foundations and Refugee Scholars between the Two Wars and After*. Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2000, p. 36.

⁶ Etienne Dennery to T.B. Kitteredge, 12 June 1941, translation from French, folder 569, box 49, series 200, RG 1.1, RFA.

⁷ Thomas B. Appleget, "The Foundation's Experience with Refugee Scholars," folder 545a, box 47, Record Group 1.1, RFA.