Rockefeller Foundation And The Promotion Of Social Sciences In Interwar Czechoslovakia

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The non-profit foundations have been often seen in the literature as important agents of social change and innovation [e.g. Hammack, Anheier 2010], but there is wide disagreement as to the limits of their ability to produce durable effects. Based on available archival records and existing scholarship, this paper presents a case study of the failure of one major foundation to effectuate change in a particular area: namely the unsuccessful attempt of the Rockefeller Foundation to establish empirical social sciences in the interwar Czechoslovakia.

There is a growing bulk of literature on the impact of American philanthropic foundations on the development of academic institutions and disciplines, social sciences included. For North America and the UK, these works include Fisher [1983] or Lagemann [1999]. Other studies have been dedicated to the history, programs and influence of particular foundations, such as Bulmer and Bulmer [1981] on the Rockefeller Foundation, or Lagemann [1989] on the Carnegie Corporation. Important work has been also done on the role of American foundations in supporting social sciences in continental Europe, especially in France, Germany and Italy. The activities of the Rockefeller and Ford foundation in France or Europe more broadly have received sustained attention in the works of, e.g., Mazon [1985] and Tournès [2008]. For Germany and Austria, available studies include Staley [1995] or Fleck [2011]. Comparative work across Europe is less extensive, with some important exceptions [Gemelli 1998; Gemelli, MacLeod 2003]. Very little, however, has been written so far on the contribution of US foundations to the promotion of social sciences in East Central Europe.

Czechoslovakia represents one blank space in the research of the impact of large American philanthropic foundations on the development of social sciences which this paper attempts to fill out. The policy of the Rockefeller Foundation towards social sciences in Czechoslovakia between 1924 and 1948 is a fascinating example of a foundation’s goals being frustrated as a result of extremely volatile and adverse political environment and institutional inertia. The RF provided scholarships for Czechoslovak social scientists (around 35) and sponsored social science work at various Czechoslovak institutions. The scholars who were supported by the RF, both German- and Czech-speaking, mostly trained as lawyers or economists, were to be converted into modern-type social scientists. The RF had also expected that grantees would become important national leaders within their new discipline and consistently preferred candidates who were considered future successors to the established university chairs or holders of newly created chairs. However, because of institutional resistance and the political turmoil of the years 1938-1950 none of the Czechoslovak grantees in the social sciences had achieved a remarkable position in their home country. Their individual fates display wide variation: several perished during WWII, others escaped in late 1930s and begun a new career in the West (often outside the academia), still others were exiled after 1948, some stayed and were persecuted
or marginalized. The RF was well positioned to make a significant contribution to the development of empirical social research and social policy in Czechoslovakia, but the overall impact of its funding was first diluted by the hostility of Czechoslovak institutions to innovation and later on virtually erased by adverse political conditions.

References