

## SOCIAL SCIENCES

# The Price of Objectivity

Audra J. Wolfe

In the summer of 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives threatened to defund the National Science Foundation's Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (1). That effort failed, but the following spring the Republican-led House continued its assault with a measure barring the NSF from funding research in political science. Conservative critics, led by Representative Jeff Flake (R-AZ), charged that too much of the NSF's budget was supporting politically biased research that offered little social benefit beyond satisfying the "curiosities of a few academics" (2).

Such charges have dogged the NSF's programs in the social sciences from the agency's earliest days. Nor has the NSF been the only target: during the first decade of the Cold War, congressional critics charged that both the Pentagon and private philanthropic foundations were sponsoring work in the social sciences that either served no useful purpose or undermined American values. In *Shaky Foundations*, Mark Solovey charts how these ongoing attacks forged the claims to objectivity so characteristic of the postwar social sciences. As federal and philanthropic support for basic research in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics grew in the 1950s and 1960s, entrepreneurial social scientific researchers insisted that their newly "rigorous, systematic, and quantitative" methods could offer "apolitical, nonideological, and value free" tools to improve the nation's welfare and strengthen its defense. Having supposedly mastered data collection and analysis techniques developed by the natural sciences, the social sciences were well on their way to embracing what Solovey (a historian at the University of Toronto) refers to as a scientific worldview.

During the few short years that social scientists and their patrons at the Army, the Ford Foundation, and the NSF agreed on the utility of this approach, the American social sciences came the closest that they ever have to a blank check for fundamental research in human behavior—provided that research steered clear of such "social issues" as race, religion, or class. That is, of course, a pretty

big "but" for the so-called human sciences. Since the early 1960s, when New Left critics led by sociologist Irving Horowitz called out a militaristic bias in the work of economists and political scientists bankrolled by defense agencies, historians and social critics alike have uncovered the hidden costs of all this easy money. Solovey's account extends this tradition by "following the money," but his refreshing attention to his subjects' ambivalence adds a new layer to historians' understanding of the social sciences during the Cold War.

Solovey's social scientists are neither naïve researchers exploited by the military-industrial complex nor greedy masqueraders eagerly anticipating their patrons' needs. Instead, he presents us with a series of encounters between program managers, disciplinary spokesmen, and political partisans, each of which demonstrates its participants' unexpectedly complex positions. At each of

these moments—the founding of the NSF, the military's grudging acceptance of psychologists on its Human Resources Committee, the Ford Foundation's decision to create (and later end) a Behavioral Sciences Program, and the NSF's halting embrace of "hard-core" social sciences in the late 1950s—the reader encounters subjects with startling levels of self-awareness. Solovey balances every H. Rowan Gaither, who suggested that the Ford

Foundation's projects in the behavioral sciences should be modeled after "a natural science like physics," with a Donald David, who warned that Ford neglected "human motives and the forces which govern human relations" at its peril.

In what feels like a prelude to contemporary partisan investigations of the social sciences, *Shaky*

*Foundations* recounts numerous instances of McCarthy-era attacks on social scientists as leftist agitators. Less familiar, however, are complaints from the right that the social sciences were too scientific. The 1954 Reece Committee hearings in the U.S. House, for instance, featured a series of witnesses who charged that social scientists' quest for value neutrality was leading the nation down a godless path. Conservative William F. Buckley Jr. similarly argued in 1952 that modern

sociologists and psychologists were trying to convert college students to "atheistic socialists." Critics on the left, meanwhile, charged that the commitment to "value-free" research had removed any impetus for social change. Against this background, the collapse of scientism in the 1960s seems not so much curious as inevitable.

*Shaky Foundations* ends there, with the mutual disenchantment of patron and client. As Solovey puts it, "assumptions about the apolitical and value-neutral character of legitimate scientific inquiry [seem] to be long gone and not likely to return any time soon." An unexplored irony of his account is the federal government's embrace of quantitative social scientific assessment measures at exactly the moment—the mid-1960s—that more theoretically inclined social scientists began to lose

## Shaky Foundations

The Politics–Patronage–Social Science Nexus in Cold War America

by Mark Solovey

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**Social-science weapon.** A cluster adapter, packed with 22,500 psychological warfare leaflets, being prepared for dropping on North Korea (November 1950).

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faith in objectivity. Republicans in Congress may not approve of NSF-funded research in political science, but they certainly endorse standards-based testing for education and cost-benefit analysis in environmental regulations. Those, too, are legacies of the Cold War social sciences.

#### References

1. K. Prewitt, *Science* 333, 673 (2011).
2. D. Lederman, [www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/11/house-passes-bill-bar-spending-political-science-research](http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/11/house-passes-bill-bar-spending-political-science-research), 11 May 2012.

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## CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

# A Wild Life

Harry W. Greene

Measured against our prevailing scientific culture—experiments, grants, high-impact journals, and tensions between teaching and research—George Schaller's career has been unconventional. At one level, *Tibet Wild* is a memoir of research on gorillas, lions, and other mammals in some of the most remote places on Earth. It spans eight decades, four continents, diverse species of large vertebrates, and accolades like the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement and the National Book Award for Science, yet none of it, beyond graduate school, takes place in a university setting.

On another level, this poignant autobiography circles around two interesting problems: What are the origins and consequences of such intensely personal commitment? And, more generally, how can we preserve biodiversity in the face of rapid global change?

Schaller, a self-described feral naturalist, was born in Berlin in 1933. As a boy, he scavenged food discarded by American soldiers, survived a harrowing escape through East Germany, and eventually settled in the United States. An introverted, difficult child who favored solitude, he was a bored, mediocre high school student until a summer exploring the Yukon set his course on the outdoors. Influential teachers also lit the way, first during undergraduate courses and fieldwork in

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Alaska, then while he was a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin. After dissertation work on gorillas, he landed a dream job with the Wildlife Conservation Society, for whom he conducted the first detailed studies of tigers, thence lions, giant pandas, and other species. The lion project, for example, entailed some 3000 hours of fieldwork, recalled as the happiest time of his life, to investigate trade-offs between solitary versus group hunting and the ecological impact of predators (1).

For more than three decades now, Schaller has worked in Asia, under some of the most demanding conditions ever endured by biologists. The Chang Tang is an enormous plain straddling Tibet's borders with the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Qinghai Province, mostly uninhabited except for wildlife and small, widely scattered human settlements. Temperatures hover below  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  and sometimes plunge to  $-34^{\circ}\text{C}$  or worse, so even the simplest camp tasks can be hazardous due to exposure. Equipment regularly fails. Here, accompanied by Chinese colleagues on 26 trips over the course of 41 months, Schaller repeatedly has traversed distances the equivalent of New York City to Chicago. At one point, nearing the age of 70, he finally admitted, "Walking several hundred miles with a modest pack is no problem, but pulling a loaded cart at 17,000 feet through snow and mud, and up and down steep slopes is probably beyond me."

The Chang Tang is a Pleistocene Eden, home of the richest remaining megafauna outside of Africa—including wolf, brown bear, yak, and wild ass—of which an enigmatic antelope, the chiru, and a small rabbit relative, the plateau pika, most captured Schaller's attention. When he first arrived, all but the bare essentials of the chiru's natural history, even migration routes and birthing sites, were unknown. Its immediate future was threatened by hunting (during the 1990s, 250,000 to 300,000 were killed for their luxurious wool, made into expensive shahtoosh shawls), its ultimate survival imperiled by climate change. After all those brutal months and miles, Schaller could report that a "gathering of chiru on the calving ground . . . was for me the most wondrous vision in a quarter century of following the species." On the same trips, he studied the highly social pikas and wrote a dozen charming, environmentally themed children's fables about them for translation into Tibetan.

Schaller emerged in *Stones of Silence* (2)



**On the breeding grounds.** Two male chiru (*Pantholops hodgsonii*) during their December mating season.

and other earlier accounts as decidedly taciturn, except when writing about his family or pandas and other noble animals. In *Tibet Wild*, he opens up on a wide range of personal matters, including Buddhist teachings as they relate to nature and existential questions of meaning. This latest volume begins with quotes from Basho, Laozi, and Ortega y Gasset, and throughout he writes affectionately of his wife and sons and of their home in an old New England barn, decorated with keepsakes from all over the world. A "cloud-walker," he "prefer[s] the beauty of a hermetic world suffused with stillness" and is content with "gaining new insights into a species, promoting the establishment of reserves, and stimulating young biologists to focus on conservation."

As for preserving biodiversity, Schaller's scientific efforts provide a historical baseline for vanishing species and ecosystems and his popular writings an example of how the aesthetic values of wilderness can enhance our lives. Moreover, although contemptuous of trophy hunting, he feels deep empathy for local people, including their consumption of and conflicts with the very animals he so obviously loves. Fail to address that complexity, he opines, and conservation is doomed. *Tibet Wild* offers a few such pronouncements, but mainly it lays out an open-ended account of the struggle to save wild places and their inhabitants. I can't recall any book that has made me care as much or think harder about how we might do that.

#### References

1. G. B. Schaller, *The Serengeti Lion: A Study of Predator-Prey Relations* (Univ. Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972).
2. G. B. Schaller, *Stones of Silence: Journeys in the Himalaya* (Viking, New York, 1980).

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