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Social Science

The National Science Foundation has established a Division of Social Sciences, correlative with the divisions responsible for supporting work in the physical and biological sciences. Establishment of the new division concludes a debate that began in 1946 when Congress first discussed the creation of a National Science Foundation. Some of the Congressional bills included a Division of Social Sciences; others excluded it. The final compromise was to omit specific mention of the social sciences but to give the foundation an open-ended structure by attaching the words ". . . and other sciences" to each listing of fields in which research grants, fellowships, or other support might be given. What Congress said, in essence, to the new Foundation was: "We do not instruct you to support work in the social sciences and neither do we prohibit such work; we leave the decision in your hands."

This action was satisfactory to most scientists; indeed a number of social scientists recommended that their fields not be specifically mentioned so that the controversy might be settled and the Foundation brought into being. A poll conducted by the Inter-Society Committee for a National Science Foundation, which the AAAS established in 1947 to determine and make known the consensus of scientists with respect to the several organizational problems at issue, showed 49 percent of the scientists queried as favoring inclusion of the social sciences, 2 percent opposed, and 48 percent preferring to leave the decision to the Foundation itself. Ninety-eight percent were willing either to have a Division of Social Sciences written into the bill or to have the question decided by the Foundation itself; and 63 percent said they would prefer no foundation to one from which the social sciences were excluded by statute.

In the light of its legislative history, the NSF approached the social sciences gradually. From the very beginning, fellowships in the more biological aspects of anthropology and psychology were awarded. This was not support for the social sciences, but the action gave substance to the ". . . and other sciences" portion of the mandate. Later, research was supported in those areas of the social sciences that converge with the physical or biological sciences. Still later, these programs were expanded and brought together in an Office of Social Sciences. Now the Office has become a Division. What the Foundation has done, in essence, is to reply to Congress: "We have explored carefully the means of social science support we consider proper and have now decided that full recognition, through divisional status, is desirable."

Social scientists will be pleased, and so, unless majority opinion has changed since 1947, will most other scientists; pleased both with the symbolic value of the new status and with the promise of increased support that accompanied the NSF action. Support, the NSF has pointed out, will be for basic research that meets high standards of conceptual and methodological rigor, not for "applied craftsmanship in social affairs." This is as it should be, to be consistent with other programs of the NSF, to allay any remaining fears that the term *social science* is merely a cloak for action on important but sometimes controversial social issues, and to help competent research scholars interested in human and social behavior to develop their field to the point where there will no longer be any doubts concerning the appropriateness of the word *science* in *social science*.—D.W.