

Anastasia Chistyakova: THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION AND ITS SUPPORT FOR HUNGARIAN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

Bachelor thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University Prague

Comments by thesis supervisor

The central question of this Bachelor thesis is what influence the Rockefeller Foundation fellowships held by Hungarian social scientists had on the development of “social sciences in Hungary” (p. 7). The Rockefeller Foundation awarded fellowships to Hungarian social scientists in the period 1926 - 1939 and then again in the aftermath of the Hungarian Uprising, 1956 - 1958. The total number of fellows from Hungary in social sciences amounts to 24. This research fits neatly into the growing body of literature on the contribution of philanthropic foundations to the development of academic disciplines and institutions in various countries across the world. Chistyakova’s study is, to my knowledge, the first of this group of Hungarian social science fellows.

The thesis consists of an introduction, conclusion and three chapters in between. Chapter 1 (Methodology) provides basic information about the research (mostly archival with some input from desktop research). It fails, however, to give sufficient rationale for the prosopographic method which the author has adopted from the previous work undertaken by the Austrian historian of sociology Christian Fleck. It is not entirely clear how to use prosopography in order to answer the main research question.

The author raises in the methodological chapter various preliminary research questions which do not serve well the purpose of giving her research a clear focus. The questions are too many and they are too general in their scope to be adequately answered with the data and the type of analytical tools the author has at her disposal. These questions, except the principal one stated above, might be useful in providing structure to her thesis, but they are not research questions in the technical sense of the term, and they do not match the actual analysis.

The methodological section could have elaborated more on the archival material, the RF fellowship cards kept in the Rockefeller Archive Center, and on the limitations of this archival source.

Chapter 2 provides historical background for the analytical part which follows afterward. It draws upon the existing research on the contribution of the Rockefeller and other private foundations to the development of social sciences, with a focus on Central and Eastern Europe. The main facts are presented, but not every single statement is correct and the overall picture suffers from oversimplifications (attributable to the inherent difficulty this complex theme presents for undergraduate students). The author places excessive emphasis on the figure of Beardsley Ruml and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation in the 1920s, whereas the development of the RF and its policy towards social sciences in the subsequent decades receives rather cursory treatment. There is a big leap in the historical narrative from Ruml in 2.4 to the Cold War in 2.5.

The section 2.5 should contain some information on the RF policies related to Hungary in the 1950s. It would be certainly useful to investigate the attitude of the RF towards Hungarian scholars after the defeat of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. Yet, to be fair, I have to say that the author did not have access to the relevant materials from the Rockefeller Archive.

The first part of Chapter 3 provides background on the RF funding for social sciences in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary as well as on the development of social sciences in Hungary until 1950s. This broad factographic framework is asked for by the subsequent empirical analysis, but once again, it suffers from oversimplifications and inaccuracies. The author summarizes the operations of the RF regarding social sciences in the three Central European countries with limited knowledge of local institutional and intellectual settings. In particular, the short overview of the history and development of social sciences in Hungary is unsuitable to provide the necessary basis for any serious assessment of the impact the RF fellowships might have had in this country. Chistyakova is able to show that RF fellowships probably had an impact on the individual careers of various fellows. But the allegedly central issue of the influence on social sciences in Hungary is not addressed at all.

The crucial conceptual shortcoming of this piece of research is that the author has failed to distinguish between social sciences in Hungary and social sciences conducted globally by persons of Hungarian origin. It seems that the most successful RF fellows of Hungarian origin had an academic career in the West rather than in Hungary. She does not distinguish properly between those scholars who returned to their home country and stayed despite political upheavals and those who left Hungary in the course of their fellowship or at a later moment. She also misses the opportunity to discuss and explain the difference in the rate of international success between the relatively unknown RF fellows from Hungary and those Hungarian émigrés who became globally recognized for their academic work (K. Mannheim, K. Polányi, J. von Neumann, all of whom were, by the way, recipients of RF funding at some stage of their academic career).

The key section 3.1 begins with a summary of the information gathered from RF fellowship cards provided in the form of an extensive table. In the next step, the data are analysed and the author offers explanations for some of the observed patterns. This section is original to some degree and, for me, it is also the most readable part of the thesis. However, the category "activity after the fellowship" is misleading, since the index cards give only some, not all information about the fellows. The author has done little to double-check the information shown on the cards using other sources such as encyclopaedias or obituaries. This means that she is not able to pursue the impact of the RF funding transmitted through the actions of the former fellows very far. To some extent, this shortcoming is made up for in the section 3.2. which briefly presents further careers and research achievements of a group of selected scholars (apparently the most successful ones, but it is difficult to judge, as no indicator of success is provided). This is a clever move, but it does not help much in the task of clarifying the impact of the RF on social sciences in Hungary, as most of those selected ended up living in exile. Also, the author could have included short biographical profiles of two other important scholars among the RF fellows, namely Tivadar (Theodor) Surányi-Unger and Lajos (Ludwig) Kardos.

As already indicated, the sections 3.1 to 3.3 and the Conclusion miss the opportunity to explicitly return to research questions presented in the chapter on Methodology and answer

these based on the data and figures from the analysis.

The conclusion could give a bit less ambiguous answer to the question whether the RF impact was positive or not.

Literature is referenced most of the time correctly. For reasons not clear to me some references in the final version were changed for the worse. Instead of referencing the chapter on Hungary (and Poland) by Witzak Haugstad and Ingebrigsten, the author acknowledges only the editors of the respective volume, Gemelli and MacLeod, 2003, who haven't written on Hungary. The reference to Buxton 2003 (again a last moment change) is probably incorrect, as this article makes no mention of the state of social sciences in Eastern Europe.

The last remark concerns the quality of the English in this text. It is quite good for a non-native speaker, but far from flawless. Time and again, limited command of the language leads to insufficient clarity and precision, especially when more complex ideas are being conveyed.

The author might be requested to submit an archive version which is written in perfect academic English.

In sum, this is a solid B.A. thesis that analyses a unique set of archival materials and provides sufficient evidence of its author's ability to digest a broad range of academic literature. The overall goal has proved to be overly ambitious, but the outcome is no less than satisfactory.

I am happy to recommend to the Thesis Defence Committee to accept this text as a B.A. Thesis. I would grade it with a 2 or 3, depending on the performance of the author at the defence.

Řevnice, August 9 2016

doc. Marek Skovajsa, Ph.D.