

On Values and Action: A statement by SSRC President Ira Katznelson

On January 23, the Social Science Research Council gathered with the executive directors of the social science associations with whom the organization has had a relationship since the Council's founding in 1923 as the globe's first national social science institution. Convening in Washington, DC at the headquarters of the American Political Science Association, and joined by the director of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, this was a long-scheduled meeting in a regular series convened by the SSRC that considers shared issues such as the transparency of research, forms of publication, and the voice of social science. Taking place in the immediate aftermath of the Inauguration, massive protests, and the "alternative facts" controversy, much of the conversation focused on our role as guardians of scholarship and on effective means of engagement beyond the academy.

None of these organizations is partisan; certainly not the SSRC. Each, however, not least the SSRC, is committed to a series of central tenets. These include standards of inquiry and evidence, international collaboration, and values underpinning constitutional democracies devoted to the rule of law, individual rights, and the absence of religious tests for membership. Within this frame, the leaders of the learned societies and Council staff discussed the roles we should play when our essential obligations to scholarship and public affairs come under challenge.

By the end of last week, the dimensions of this question had grown. For the Council, the implications of President Trump's *Executive Order on Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements* hit home when a doctoral scholar at Stanford University, twice selected as an SSRC Fellow (awarded Council fellowships for dissertation preparation and field work in her native Sudan), and the holder of a green-card, was detained and handcuffed last Friday night at Kennedy Airport before her release. As the Association of American Universities and the presidents of many campuses, including Columbia, Johns Hopkins, the New School, and Stanford, have underscored, this approach to national security contravenes values democratic societies and the scholarly world hold dear.

The Council welcomes these statements and aligns with them. But remonstrations must be accompanied by concrete behavior. Within the framework of our organizational character, how should the SSRC act? For which activities should we enhance our resolve?

I believe the answer lies less with responses to day-to-day events and provocations than with intensifying each of the institution's primary purposes:

First is deepening the craft of social science. If we are to advance the abilities of scholars to deploy rigorous inquiry, cross intellectual frontiers, and advance human understanding, we must resist restrictions on the movement of colleagues and students across borders, and act to safeguard ever more vigorously the institutions and norms that advance reliability and protect the integrity of social research. These valuable bodies include the national statistical system, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, and other federal agencies undergirding our system of open, standards-based social knowledge, the foundation of democratic reason.

Second is the long-standing practice to summon national and international scholarship in the academy to serve civic purposes. Especially in troubled times, the SSRC should ask how to best strengthen Council programs on peacebuilding, the environment, patterns of racial inequality, digital culture, the place of religion in the public sphere and other vexing subjects, and we must assiduously intensify our work concerning “Anxieties of Democracy.” That program, which first took shape four years ago, is motivated by concern for how the core institutions of established democracies—elections, political parties, interest groups, social movements, and legislatures—address large problems in the public interest. The recent addition of a media project to its existing working groups on participation, institutions, climate, social policy, and national security is particularly timely.

Third is our focus on building the capacities of individual scholars and institutions in the United States and abroad to practice social science effectively. The Council has an array of fellowships and projects whose aim is to strengthen and democratize higher education, including efforts not only to educate better scholars, but help scholars become better educators, and thus pass to new generations both their craft and a deeper understanding of their commitments.

These pursuits offer both means and inspiration that we must seize in efforts to protect and enhance conditions for effective scholarship.

Fourth is the imperative of communication. The Council’s voice in each of these respects must become more expansive and more vibrant.

Now in its tenth decade, the SSRC has witnessed fear-inducing economic hardship, global warfare, political despotism, and depredations based on race, class, and religion. Working across lines of party, demography, and geography, I am confident that we can augment our efforts to shield and deploy social science to prevent cruelty and imagine decent alternatives.

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