Analytic Note #7:

Progressivism-Government Support for Social R and D

Prior to the 20th Century, America did not rely very much on government to produce important social change – at least not beyond the realm of economics. Government’s role in shaping American society had been limited to support for economic development and for military purposes. It had built infrastructure in the forms of canals, railroads, and roads that could facilitate local commerce. It had relied on science and engineering to help the Union win the Civil War, and had established the National Academy of Sciences as a way of keeping science close to government and the practical problems it faced. It had built a patent system and a system of weights and standards that could also facilitate commerce. It had created room in the society for the creation of publicly held corporations that could raise money from investors. And so on. And, as noted in the readings below, it had built a fairly elaborate system of land grant universities, extension services, and county agents to develop and spread good practices in agriculture and mining. But it had not yet developed the idea that government, by accumulating scientific knowledge, could contribute not only to economic prosperity, but also to social advancement.

At the turn of the 20th century, when confidence in science was perhaps at its highest level (at least until the 1960’s), American society began to think that if the tools of science were allied with the powers of government, some important social progress could be created along with the significant economic progress that American society had already enjoyed. What came to be called the Progressive Era began. We imagined that science, or more broadly, ratonal methods, could be used to help us develop substantive knowledge about how to guard the public health through improved sewage and water supply, but also administrative and managerial knowledge about how we might best organize human beings to produce desired results efficiently and effectively. Tradition, patronage, cronyism, even laxness were all to be eliminated through the scourging fire of science brought to bear on practical problems.

This progressive ideal has survived for more than a century, though our confidence in its claims have waxed and waned. In almost every period of American history one can feel the weight of the idea that science can advance human welfare, and that in order to do so, government must both support the development of science and find the means to use it in advancing its many purposes – not only economic development and defense, but also broader purposes.

Exactly how this might be done, and more particularly, what level of government should take the responsibility for organizing science for public purposes, remained unclear. Initially, one of the strong arguments for federalism was that the different states could serve as “laboratories for democracy.” The idea was that states would naturally produce variation on public policies, and that variation could then be used and examined both by the national government and by other states to discover what particular methods seemed to work better than others. Later, more confidence was placed in the federal government. The idea was that the federal government was in a good position to support basic and applied research that sought solutions to urgent public problems, to carry out field tests of whether particular interventions worked or not, and to help disseminate the results to governments throughout the land. There has also long been the idea that local governments could play an important role in at least the process of developing and experimenting with new methods that were locally responsive and approved, and might point the way for others, even if the localities could not be expected to bear the full costs of testing and disseminating.

While government’s roll in this progressivist ideal was central, it often seemed expedient to partner with foundations for some of this experimental work. Sometimes governments and foundations would join together in developing the ideas to be tried, and evaluating them together. Other times, foundations would do this basic work, and hope to influence government. (In this respect, the progressivist government force for change was closely aligned with the philanthropic force for change.)

The question for our discussion is whether this idea can become a powerful force for changing education. We are certainly spending a lot on it.