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Economics and Social Science Interdisciplinarity in Times of Uncertainty: Profiles and Perspectives of the AEA Representatives at the SSRC, 1923–1938

A ciência econômica e a interdisciplinaridade das ciências sociais em tempos de incerteza: perfis e perspectivas dos representantes da AEA no SSRC, 1923–1938

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Abstract

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was created in 1923 to foster collaboration across social sciences and promote interdisciplinary knowledge. To achieve this, the Council brought together representatives from various learned societies, ranging from sociology to statistics. Economists, through the American Economic Association (AEA), were no exception. This paper seeks to identify the economists representing the AEA at the SSRC during the 1920s and 1930s and provide a broad overview of their economic perspectives. Additionally, the paper aims to outline a profile for the economists practicing social science interdisciplinarity in the interwar years, based on common features in their thoughts and professional engagements.

Keywords

Social Science Research Council. Economics. Interdisciplinarity. Interwar Period. Uncertainty.

JEL Codes A11, B31 Y80.

Resumo

O Social Science Research Council (SSRC) foi criado em 1923 para promover a colaboração entre as ciências sociais e incentivar o conhecimento interdisciplinar. Para alcançar esse objetivo, o Conselho reuniu representantes de diversas sociedades acadêmicas, desde a sociologia até a estatística. Economistas, através da American Economic Association (AEA), não foram exceção. Este artigo busca identificar os economistas que representaram a AEA no SSRC durante as décadas de 1920 e 1930 e fornecer uma visão geral de suas perspectivas econômicas. Além disso, o artigo pretende traçar um perfil dos economistas que praticavam a interdisciplinaridade nas ciências sociais no período entre guerras, com base em características comuns em seus pensamentos e atuações profissionais.

Palavras-chave

Social Science Research Council. Ciência Econômica. Interdisciplinaridade. Período Entreguerras. Incerteza.

Códigos JEL *A11, B31, Y80.*

1 **Introduction**

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was "organized in 1923 by concurrent action of national associations interested in social research" (American Economic Association, 1926, p. 345). These initially included the American Economic Association, the American Sociological Society, the American Political Science Association, and the American Statistical Association. From 1925 onward, the SSRC expanded to include the American Historical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Anthropological Association as well (American Economic Association, 1926, p. 345). The creation of the SSRC aimed to foster a collaboration between the social sciences and promote interdisciplinary social knowledge, addressing the prevailing fear of exaggerated departmentalization and compartmentalization between the social sciences (Ogburn; Goldenweiser, 1927, p. 6; Kuhlman, 1928, p. 583). Eventually, a sort of social science interdisciplinarity along SSRC lines would prove to be a "mirage," according to Abbott (2001, p. 132). Nonetheless, if the social sciences remained interlocked to some extent throughout the interwar period—as the standard narrative implies (see Backhouse; Fontaine, 2018)—much of that is owed to the SSRC.

In light of the Council's centenary, we should notice that, within the classes of professionals involved in the early years of the SSRC, economists are arguably those whose discipline has undergone the most transformations over the past century. Economics transitioned from a pluralistic, interdisciplinary social science in the interwar period (Morgan; Rutherford, 1998; Geary, 2010), to a highly hypothetico--deductive, abstract discipline in the post-War era (Backhouse, 1998; Backhouse; Fontaine, 2018; Akerlof, 2020), and then to an empirical discipline which, from the 1970s onward, has exhibited growing but still low levels of interdisciplinarity with its neighboring social sciences (Hamermesh, 2013; Angrist *et al.*, 2020; Cruz-e-Silva; Cavalieri, 2022; Truc *et al.*, 2023).

Also relevant is the perception that disciplinary boundaries were not as distinct during the interwar years as they are today. Indeed, by 1928, it was not uncommon to find political scientists, sociologists, and statisticians affiliated to the AEA, for example (Rice; Green, 1929, p. 440). Still, there was enough compartmentalization to warrant Ogburn and Goldenweiser's (1927) aforementioned concerns. This allows us to treat the SSRC as an *interdisciplinary* endeavor.

That said, the purpose of this paper is to present who were the economists who practiced social science interdisciplinarity in the interwar years—specifically, those who represented the AEA at the SSRC in the 1920s and 1930s. We aim to explore both who these men (all of them were men) were and the key principles that guided their work as economists. These figures were part of the profession's elite, a group typically responsible for shaping the most important features of a discipline. Based on the characteristics most frequently found in their work, we also seek to identify a profile for the interdisciplinary economist of the interwar years. As the appeal of this topic arises from the drive to understand the character of economics in the times of uncertainty of the interwar period, we frame this endeavor especially within the history of pluralism and interdisciplinarity in American economics. Pluralism refers to openness to diverse perspectives and ideas *within* a single discipline; interdisciplinarity involves openness to perspectives and ideas from *other* disciplines. Morgan and Rutherford (1998), for example, claim that interwar American economics was marked by a pluralistic equal footing between neoclassical and institutional economics. This feature vanished after World War II, when the prestige of institutionalists waned. A similar trend may be observed in the interdisciplinarity between economics and the social sciences. Therefore, it is hardly a coincidence that, as we will see, the economists hoisting the colors of social interdisciplinarity in the style of the SSRC during the interwar period maintained close ties with the institutionalist movement.

Accordingly, this study does not aim to present at length the contributions of the AEA representatives at the SSRC (henceforth "AEA representatives"). Rather, it aims to offer a broad overview of both the individuals who officially represented the AEA in preaching social science interdisciplinarity in economics in the interwar period and the elements underpinning their activities as economists.

Two reasons justify the limitation of this study to the interwar years. First, the war effort "disrupted the Council's normal types of assistance," said Edwin Griswold Nourse in 1943 during his tenure as SSRC chairman (1942–1945) (in Worcester, 2001, p. 37). Symptomatic of this disruption is the absence of SSRC reports at the AEA from 1939 to 1946—except for 1940. Secondly, the very character of economics changed after the war, and the self-image of the post-war economist became quite different from the one that prevailed throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Backhouse; Fontaine, 2010).

Accordingly, the next section of the paper discusses the creation of the SSRC and its guiding principles. The third section recollects and presents the names of the men who represented the AEA at the SSRC during the interwar period. The fourth section identifies some shared features among them in terms of their works as economists and their understandings of economics. Finally, some concluding remarks close the paper.

2 The Social Science Research Council: foundation and early years

The foundation and early years of the SSRC have already been extensively treated in other works, such as Kuhlman (1928, 1933), Ross (1991), Abbott (2001), Seim (2013), Cohen-Cole (2014), and Backhouse and Fontaine (2018). Especially Sibley (1974), Fisher (1993), and Worcester (2001) present comprehensive histories of the SSRC. For this reason, this will be a brief section.

The SSRC, "the world's first national organization of all the social sciences," according to Worcester (2001, p. 15), was created in 1923 by the auspices of Chicago political scientist Charles Edward Merriam (1874–1953). It cannot be said that Merriam single-handedly *founded* the SSRC, because the Council came into existence as the product of a community of social scientists who faced stringencies in financing their research (Karl, 1976, p. 123). Nonetheless, it is hard to dispute that, within this community, Merriam was the main driving force behind the creation of the SSRC.[1] Coming from a place of "feelings of inferiority that afflicted political scientists and sociologists in the presence of more scientific sister disciplines," and inspired by the creation of the National Research Council, which aimed to develop the natural sciences, Merriam conceived the SSRC as an enterprise in social science interdisciplinarity whose aim was to strengthen the scientific capacities of the social sciences (Ross, 1991, p. 401; Seim, 2013, p. 188). The goals were ultimately realism and the scientization of the social disciplines (Abbott, 2001, p. 132; Cohen-Cole, 2014, p. 76). Therefore, the SSRC was supposed to provide flexible institutional structures for research work at service of the public interest (Backhouse; Fontaine, 2018, p. 11). The legal incorporation of the SSRC took place on 27 December 1924 (Seim, 2013, p. 188).

The funding for the creation of the SSRC came mainly from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), directed by Chicago psychometrist Beardsley Ruml (1894–1960) (Ross, 1991, p. 401; see also Seim, 2013, pp. 4–5). In fact, credit for the influential role of the Rockefeller Foundation in advancing the social sciences goes to Ruml, because he was, as per Ross (1991, p. 401), "the person who guided the Rockefellers to the social scientists" (see also Bulmer; Bulmer, 1981). Such was the centrality of the LSRM to the establishment of the SSRC that Fisher (1993, p. 27), in his history of the early years of the Council, places Ruml alongside Merriam as the "two architects behind the creation of the SSRC."

1 For a fuller account of Merriam's role in the creation of the SSRC, see chapter 7 of his biography (Karl, 1976).

Thus, led by Merriam and funded by Ruml, the creation of the SSRC was a joint effort of several social science learned societies, which included economics, political science, sociology, and statistics. Mitchell was the third name of the triumvirate that led the SSRC in its first years, which also denotes the tangency between the SSRC and the institutionalist movement in the US (see Seim, 2013, p. 189). In 1925, historians, psychologists, and anthropologists joined the Council as well (American Economic Association, 1926; Kuhlman, 1928). In the first SSRC report presented at the AEA, in 1924, the AEA Executive Committee justified its support for the foundation of the SSRC on the grounds that cooperation between the social sciences was desirable "for the purpose of promoting and coordinating teaching and research, and of furthering the development of research methods in the social studies" (American Economic Association, 1924, p. 174).

As such, the SSRC was created as "a body of twenty-one members representing the seven national organizations [three members per organization] in the United States chiefly interested in social science research" (American Economic Association, 1927, p. 199). The issues taken as primary concerns of the Council in its early years were crime, racial studies, alcoholism, agricultural economics, and social and industrial relationships (American Economic Association, 1926, p. 345). In the New Deal years, the problems and plans of national recovery also entered the SSRC agenda (American Economic Association, 1934, p. 209).

The meetings of the SSRC were geared toward enhancing the works of the Council and promoting social science interdisciplinarity. Already in 1924, for instance, fellowships were discussed as a way to improve the quality of social science personnel, and funding research in the social sciences soon became one of the most fundamental activities of the SSRC, with the first fellowships awarded in 1925 (American Economic Association, 1926). The purpose of the fellowships was to develop "available personnel for the prosecution of studies in the field of social research" (American Economic Association, 1927, p. 203). The funds came from several sources, among which we may highlight the LSRM (American Economic Association, 1927; see Fisher, 1993). Together, in the 1920s, the SSRC and the LSRM invested 41 million dollars in the social work of American social scientists and their institutions (Ross, 1991, p. 402). For all of this, as Cohen-Cole (2014, p. 102) notes, the SSRC and the Rockefeller Foundation were the primary patrons who "decided that interdisciplinarity was the shortest route to solving practical problems" in the interwar years. This, again, was a top-down decision driven by a generously funded elite within the social disciplines.

3 The economists who practiced social science interdisciplinarity

Several economists represented the AEA at the SSRC during the interwar period. From 1924 up to 1938, with the exception of 1932, these individuals consistently presented reports at the AEA. These reports were generally straightforward, summarizing the Council's activities in broad terms. Table 1 lists the AEA representatives during the 1920s and 1930s. The starting point for this list is the signatures found at the bottom of each SSRC report presented to the AEA. Those who signed the report for a given year served as AEA representatives in the preceding year. For example, Mitchell and Secrist represented the AEA at the SSRC in 1923 and, accordingly, signed the 1924 report detailing the Council's activities for 1923.

By SSRC norms, from 1924 onward, each learned society should have three representatives at the Council. Thus, in each report there should be three signatures, but we do not find all of them in the reports of 1925, 1929, and 1930—and we find no reports whatsoever in 1932 and 1939. The supplementary information about the representatives in these years was gathered from the SSRC 1934 Decennial Report and from Elbridge Sibley's volume on the fiftieth anniversary of the SSRC (Social Science Research Council, 1934, p. 21; Sibley, 1974, pp. 122–123).[2]

In table 1, years marked with an asterisk do not have three-signature reports. Names are listed in the order they signed the reports, and those followed by an asterisk cannot be found among the signatories, but represented the AEA nonetheless, as per Social Science Research Council (1934) and Sibley (1974).[3] Numbers following each name indicate the number of times that individual served at the SSRC. Alongside their first appearance, their affiliation is listed, followed by the institution's position in the sixteen-entry ranking of Economics graduate departments for 1925, as presented in Keniston (1959, p. 129).

2 Commons signed the report of 1925 "for the representatives." Edmund Ezra Day read the report at the AEA meeting in 1929, but he was actually a representative of the American Statistical Association at the SSRC—by 1928, nearly 20 percent of the AEA members were also members of the American Statistical Association (Rice; Green, 1929, p. 442). In 1930, only Marshall and Barnett signed the report.

3 It is unclear why four individuals represented the AEA at the SSRC in 1925 and 1931, but this is what Social Science Research Council (1934) and Sibley (1974) indicate.

Table 1 **AEA representatives at the SSRC in the interwar period**

Year	Representative	Affiliation
1923	Wesley Clair Mitchell	Columbia University (2)
	Horace Secrist	Northwestern University (14)
1924*	John Rogers Commons	University of Wisconsin (4)
	Joseph Stancliffe Davis*	Stanford University (15)
	Horace Secrist* (2)	
1925*	George Ernest Barnett	Johns Hopkins University (6)
	John Rogers Commons (2)	
	Horace Secrist (3)	
	Joseph Stancliffe Davis* (2)	
1926	Wesley Clair Mitchell (2)	
	Horace Secrist (4)	
	George Ernest Barnett (2)	
1927	George Ernest Barnett (3)	
	Horace Secrist (5)	
	Walter Winne Stewart	New School for Social Research (–)
1928*	George Ernest Barnett* (4)	
	Leon Carroll Marshall*	Johns Hopkins University (6)
	Horace Secrist* (6)	
1929*	Leon Carroll Marshall (2)	
	George Ernest Barnett (5)	
	Alvin Saunders Johnson*	New School for Social Research (–)
1930	Harry Alvin Millis	University of Chicago (3)
	Alvin Saunders Johnson (2)	
	George Ernest Barnett (6)	
1931*	Alvin Saunders Johnson* (3)	
	Harry Alvin Millis* (2)	
	Max Sylvius Handman*	University of Michigan (7)
	Albert Benedict Wolfe*	Ohio State University (16)
1932	Max Sylvius Handman (2)	
	Harry Alvin Millis (3)	
	Albert Benedict Wolfe (2)	
1933	Albert Benedict Wolfe (3)	
	Max Sylvius Handman (3)	
	Harry Alvin Millis (4)	
1934	Harry Alvin Millis (5)	
	Max Sylvius Handman (4)	
	Alvin Harvey Hansen	University of Minnesota (13)
1935	Harry Alvin Millis (6)	
	Alvin Harvey Hansen (2)	
	Sumner Huber Slichter	Harvard University (1)
1936	Alvin Harvey Hansen (3)	
	Sumner Huber Slichter (2)	
	Frank Hyneman Knight	University of Chicago (3)

continuation

1937	Sumner Huber Slichter (3)	
	Edwin Griswold Nourse	Brookings Institution (–)
	Frank Hyneman Knight (2)	
1938*	Frank Hyneman Knight* (3)	
	Edwin Griswold Nourse* (2)	
	Simon Kuznets*	University of Pennsylvania (8)

Source: Elaborated by the author from the reports presented at the AEA meetings.

Sixteen individuals served as SSRC members between 1923 and 1938 in the capacity of AEA representatives. Among them, nine represented the AEA at least three times at the SSRC during this period. Mitchell represented the AEA only twice (1923, 1926), but served as chairman of the Council from 1927 to 1929. Those who appeared the most were Horace Secrist (1923–1928), George Ernest Barnett (1925–1930), and Harry Alvin Millis (1931–1936). This section will provide a brief overview of the nine men who represented the AEA at least three times at the SSRC—plus Mitchell—and their economic perspectives, particularly before World War II ushered a new era for the discipline.[4]

Before that, nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the watershed event that was the Great Depression. This event, which ruled over much of the 1930s, became a focal point for social science debate, as no issue was more pressing than addressing the social and economic distress caused by the crisis. Not only economic questions such as breadlines, wealth maldistribution, underconsumption, and mass unemployment came to the forefront, but also issues of social psychology involving, for example, poverty behavior, homelessness, and culture (see O'Connor, 2001). Consequently, many of the topics identified below as concerns for our interdisciplinary economists are directly related to issues exacerbated by the Great Depression.

Horace Secrist (1881–1943), AEA representative at the SSRC in its first six years, served as the first secretary of the Council. He was a Wisconsin alumnus (B.A. 1907, Ph.D. 1911) who spent most of his career teaching at Northwestern University (1918–1943). Secrist's "main research activities lay in the realm of statistics, but his interests were not confined to technique [...]. He firmly believed that truth must be discovered from an analysis of factual data and he had little patience with 'armchair' economics" (Deibler, 1943, p. 365). His main interest in economics was the analysis of economic data, which he "always treated with an eye for their social and

4 The decision to present only those with three or more appearances at the SSRC in the interwar years arises from constraints related to paper length, which prevent the discussion of all sixteen representatives.

economic implications" (Deibler, 1943, p. 365). Using statistics, Secrist discussed wages of workers (Secrist, 1912), war finance (Secrist, 1917), food expenditures (Secrist 1919), and, most importantly, business (Secrist, 1920a, 1920b, 1931, 1933). In this latter regard, he recognized that businesses had become pivotal sponsors of private agencies for research purposes, which engulfed fields from chemistry to phenomena related to the factors "by which market fluctuations may be anticipated and uncertainties discounted" (Secrist, 1920a, p. 45). He recognized as such that uncertainty should be accounted for in business research, because "no condition is so detrimental to business as uncertainty" (Secrist, 1920b, 25). Furthermore, criticizing those who are "business blind" for treating such issues by "fixed formulae," Secrist (1920b, p. 8) believed that "to those who really look and 'see,' all business problems break up into numerous phases, each requiring different treatment as principles of psychology, social and labor theories, etc., are involved." Nonetheless, despite his holistic notion of business, the conclusion of his magnum opus, *The Triumph of Mediocrity in Business* (Secrist, 1933) that the most inefficient businesses in the US were the most prone to success was widely discredited for failing to properly use regressions to the mean (see Hotelling, 1933).

George Ernest Barnett (1873–1938) was an empirical economist who worked mainly on labor. Barnett's whole academic career was spent at Johns Hopkins, but he also devoted his time to public service, such as in the US Commission on Industrial Relations. At Johns Hopkins, Barnett was awarded a Ph.D. in 1902, held a professorship in political economy from 1901 to 1911, and was appointed professor of statistics from 1911 until his death (American Economic Association, 1951). Barnett "is not a household name even among labor economists," wrote Kaufman (2001, p. 433), but in the first decades of the twentieth century "he was widely regarded as one of the nation's leading academic experts on trade unions and collective bargaining, […] his scholarly contributions were so favorably viewed by his peers that in 1932 he was elected president of the American Economic Association." Barnett's AEA presidential address is especially relevant among his works on trade unions (Barnett, 1933). In this work he concluded that the influence of trade unions in the US was bound to fade in the foreseeable future.[5] He also discussed, nonetheless, issues related to demography (Barnett, 1902a), banking (Barnett, 1902b), economic (especially labor) history (Barnett, 1912), and cost-of-living indexes (Barnett, 1921a, 1921b).

Harry Alvin Millis (1873–1948) was also a noteworthy labor/industrial relations economist. He received an M.A. from the University of Indiana in 1896—he was

5 For a discussion about the accuracy of Barnett's predictions, see Kaufman (2001).

Commons' first graduate advisee (Rutherford, 2006, p. 177)—and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1899. Millis worked at the universities of Arkansas, Stanford, and Kansas. In 1916, returned to Chicago to become an economics professor, a position he held until 1938. From the Illinois Commission on Unemployment to the National Labor Relations Board, Millis was often engaged in public service as well, his mandates at the AEA and at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) notwithstanding (Brown *et al.*, 1949). As president of the AEA in 1934, Millis' (1935) presidential address touched upon the theory of collective bargaining. Among his most important publications, we can highlight the three-volume *Economics of Labor*, in coauthorship with Royal Ewert Montgomery, from Cornell University (Millis; Montgomery, 1938a, 1938b, 1938c). In his work on labor economics, "case studies of labor relations in particular industries and detailed studies of the character and effect of public policies" were particularly important (Brown *et al.*, 1949, pp. 746–747). He also recognized that economic processes could not have their results known a priori, and that such a notion had an impact on labor. While discussing the problem of unemployment, for instance, Millis defined that "the process by which workers displaced by technological change are absorbed is not a simple one or one the outcome of which is certain. The uncertainty and the length of the run involved in any case do not warrant the optimism which accompanies the orthodox doctrine" (Millis; Montgomery, 1938b, p. 33).[6] Furthermore, another feature of Millis' work was the reliance on social science interdisciplinarity, insofar as his economic discussions were often permeated by sociological and psychological considerations (see Millis, 1925).

Max Sylvius Handman (1885–1939) was a Romania-born social scientist whose work touched upon labor as well. Handman is hereby defined as a social scientist because, despite his professorship in economics at the University of Michigan from 1931 until his death—recommended to that position by Walton Hamilton—his Ph.D. was in sociology, obtained from the University of Chicago, in 1917. Also, most of the professorships he held up to 1931 were in sociology—such as in Missouri, where he was a close colleague of Thorstein Veblen's—whereas at the University of Texas he taught both sociology and economics (1926–1931).[7] Besides labor (Handman, 1930; 1938), issues within Handman's interests included economic history (Handman, 1927;

6 Millis and Montgomery (1938b, p. 182) argued on behalf of unemployment compensation precisely as a way to "relieve insured workers of a sense of fear and uncertainty and assist in maintaining efficiency and morale."

7 For Handman's connections with institutionalists such as Veblen and Hamilton, see Rutherford (2009).

1933), social and economic problems from a regional perspective (Handman, 1924; 1926b), and war (Handman, 1920). Handman considered that economics could not give up realism, and the most important building blocks for realistic economics in his playbook were statistics, economic history (Handman, 1928, p. 43), and social science interdisciplinarity (Handman, 1926a, p. 389). Therefore, in his research Handman combined features from all the social sciences, including history and statistics. In his review of Albion Small's *Origins of Sociology*, for instance, Handman (1926a, p. 389) claimed: "In the case of the Social Sciences to this day a line of continuity limited to the special concepts of each Social Science ends in a fantastic and arbitrary reconstruction. Political Science today cannot be understood without a knowledge of the work done in certain fields of economics. In Sociology the situation is just as dependent." Furthermore, Handman also held several public service positions, from staff of the United States Inquiry on Terms of Peace, in 1918, to member of the National Conference of Social Work, from 1926 to 1932.[8]

Sumner Huber Slichter (1892–1959) was, as Handman, a Chicago alumnus (Ph.D. 1918). After teaching at Princeton and Cornell, Slichter fixed himself at Harvard, in 1930, where he stayed until retirement (Dorfman, 1959b). Slichter made labor his main specialty, and gave special attention to social control and State intervention in the economy (see Slichter, 1928, pp. 16–17, 51). He also presented a sort of pre-Keynesian advocacy of deficit spending in times of depression, in which he argued against free enterprise and claimed that the social control of business activities had never been "more important and more difficult" (see Slichter, 1924, p. 353). Slichter had a unique view about unions. He believed that unions should reform their modus operandi, because "against really competent personnel administration the traditional tactics of organized labor and its time-honored war cries of higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions seem largely impotent" (Slichter, 1926, p. 122). Au contraire, wages could only be high if tied to high levels of consumption and productivity—which arose from an efficient social control. Nonetheless, for him, not only social control but also uncertainty conditioned the efficiency of business enterprises, because in the face of uncertainty, "enterprises postpone commitments and reduce expenditures, the volume of employment and production falls, and the standard of living drops" (Slichter, 1961 [1937], p. 72, see also Slichter, 1934, pp. 4–7, 1936). In light of all this, Slichter (1932) defended the fruitfulness of cooperation among the social sciences, because the analysis of labor should not be restricted to the amount of output produced, but

8 The source for this biographical sketch of Handman was the entry in the University of Michigan Faculty History Project, fully reproduced at https://www.irwincollier.com/interdisciplinary-moment--max-sylvius-handman-chicago-sociology-ph-d-1917/ (accessed in March 18, 2024).

to the physiological and sociological needs of the workers as well. Statistical work would, for him, play a pivotal role in these efforts, allowing for a better understanding of reality (Dunlop, 1961, pp. 55–56; see Slichter, 1928), such as in the measurement of business cycles throughout American history (Slichter. 1937). Slichter, moreover, was a member of the US Commission on Industrial Relations (1914–1915) and served as president of the AEA as well, in 1941.

Slichter's colleague-to-be Alvin Hansen (1887–1975) was also a three-time AEA representative at the SSRC. A Wisconsin Ph.D. (1918), Hansen held a professorship at the University of Minnesota (1919–1937) at the time of his engagement with the SSRC (1935–1937)—shortly thereafter, he made a move to Harvard, where he remained until 1962. Hansen's recognition came especially for his work on Keynesian economics, to which he was converted at some point between 1936 and 1938 (Barber, 1987; Miller, 2002). This recognition was instrumental in his nomination as president of the AEA in 1939, but, prior to that, he had already established himself as an accomplished scholar and significant figure in public affairs (Tobin, 1976, p. 33). Before the rise of Keynesian economics, the two lines of inquiry that dominated Hansen's interests were business cycles (Hansen, 1927) and labor (Hansen, 1920, 1921, 1922), in which he showed a particular commitment to the use of statistics (Barber, 1987, p. 192). The element that tied these lines of inquiry together in his thought was the idea that high wages generated unemployment and were likely to create instability rather than prosperity in the business cycle (see Hansen, 1923, 1925). To illustrate this and other relations, he relied on the history of the American economy (see Hansen, 1915, 1926, 1927). For him, the Great Depression was a case in point, as high wages were "inimical to economic recovery" (Hansen, 1932, p. 366), and the government should encourage wage and price flexibility while also implementing a program of unemployment insurance. Moreover, even before his Keynesian years, Hansen already reserved a place for uncertainty as an important underpinning of the economy: "The uncertainties arising from division of labor and specialization account for part of the maladjustments in our modern order that must be taken account of if we are to understand the causes of unemployment." He also related uncertainty to "the fact that the modern system of production does not immediately and directly make consumer goods" (Hansen, 1932, p. 142).

Alvin Saunders Johnson (1874–1971) was a Columbia Ph.D. (1902) known as "one of the keenest and most effective expositors of marginalist doctrine" à la John Bates Clark (Dorfman, 1959a, p. 272). Johnson was more than a marginalist, though. He was "both a master of the disciplinary core of equilibrium analysis, and a servant to humanitarian values" (Petr, 1998, p. 258)—"a neoclassical with strong social and institutional undertones," as per Colm (1968, p. 220). His AEA presidential address is a case in point: he recriminated economists for spending "too much time in ivory towers [...] and too little time out in the rough and tumble of real life" (Johnson, 1937, p. 1). In this sense, Johnson was a crusader for empirical social research, something that led him to become one of the founders of the New School for Social Research, in 1919—and its director from 1922 to 1945 (Dorfman, 1959a). Johnson's approach to economics, despite highly theoretical at times (see Johnson, 1908, 1914), was thus aimed to inform policy: "Economics is a practical science; its chief function is to throw light upon questions of political policy" (Johnson, 1909, p. 9). Working on industrial relations, for instance, he questioned the marginalist premise that cutting wages would be the way to save the economy from depression (Johnson, 1926), which prompted him to defend minimum wages (see Johnson, 1905, 1907). He also discussed issues such as rent, taxation, and economic freedom. Nonetheless, early on in his career, Johnson (1954, p. 176) recognized that any work on such ventures simply had to rely on the solid grounds of trends and statistics. Ultimately, his fondness of statistics led him to join Mitchell at the Council of National Defense, during World War I, and, later, to act as chairman of the New York War Council Committee against Discrimination in Employment during World War II (Johnson, 1952). Furthermore, Johnson also recognized the uncertain character of industrial activity, blaming the unforeseen changes in supply and demand for the generation of uncertainty as to whether a producer "can market his products at remunerative prices" (Johnson, 1909, p. 146).

During his tenure at Cornell, one of Johnson's advisees was Frank Knight (1885–1972), who perhaps has the most distinctive profile within our sample.[9] A purely theoretical economist, Knight received a "rich training in philosophy, theology, the social sciences, history and literature" (Dorfman, 1959b, pp. 467–468), earning his Ph.D. from Cornell in 1916. His doctoral dissertation later became his magnum opus, *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit*, published in 1921, while he was an Economics professor at the University of Iowa (1919–1928). In 1928, he moved to Chicago, where he became the dominant intellectual influence in the 1930s, remaining there until his retirement, in 1955 (Stigler, 1985). Knight's renown comes mainly from his 1921 book, a study in pure theory, in which he aimed to explain free enterprise and its central figure, the entrepreneur (Dorfman, 1959b). Nonetheless, the most important theoretical construct advanced in his book was the distinction between risk and uncertainty, which soon became canonical. For him, "the practical difference

9 When Johnson left Cornell, in 1913, Allyn Abbott Young took charge as Knight's advisor.

between the two categories, risk and uncertainty, is that in the former the distribution of outcome in a group of instances is known [...] while in the case of uncertainty this is not true, the reason being in general that it is impossible to form a group of instances" (Knight, 1921, p. 233). But Knight was more than the mighty champion of uncertainty. He also worked on issues such as price theory (Knight, 1924a, 1928), capital theory (Knight, 1931), and liberalism (Knight, 1939). He defended the approximation of the social sciences to treat social and political phenomena (Knight, 1934), but refrained to subscribe to history and statistics as useful tools in economics as a science (Knight, 1924b). After refusing his nomination as AEA president in 1936 and 1937, Knight finally occupied the post in 1950 (Stigler, 1985).

Defined by Fiorito (2003, p. 451) as "an institutionalist with progressive roots," Albert Benedict Wolfe (1876–1967) also represented the AEA three times. Wolfe was a Harvard alumnus (B.A. 1901, Ph.D. 1905) who, after working at Oberlin College and at the University of Texas, joined the Economics Department of Ohio State University in 1923 and stayed there for the remainder of his career. According to Dorfman (1959b, p. 569), "Wolfe was one of only a handful in the profession who devoted major attention to demography," which may be taken as one of his two most frequent fields of inquiry (see Wolfe, 1927, 1934).[10] Wolfe also showed a great pedagogical commitment with the social sciences, and published several works defending a more thorough social instruction for economists and other classes of social scientists (Wolfe, 1913, 1914). His aim in this regard was to prepare the students to address social relations and social problems in the public service (Wolfe, 1914, p. 5). In fact, his own work was greatly concerned with social questions—his second great field of inquiry—and he relied on the social sciences to address them (Wolfe, 1916, 1923). While he was heading the Industrial Relations Division of the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation, Wolfe (1919) delved into labor economics, discussing organized labor and cooperative management. Issues of labor also permeated Wolfe's discussion of the eugenic virtues of unemployment—which prompted him to defend the minimum wage (Wolfe *et al.*, 1917). In these initiatives, Wolfe relied heavily on the use of both statistical information and economic history to bolster his claims, such as in his discussions about the demographical characteristics of early peoples (Wolfe, 1933) and in the determination of the interest rate (Wolfe, 1920). In 1943, Wolfe served as president of the AEA.

Lastly, a major name of institutionalism who represented the AEA at the SSRC was Wesley Clair Mitchell (1874–1948). Mitchell was an AEA representative in 1923 and

10 Barnett also published works on demography, but it was not within his most pressing interests.

1926, but he also acted in the Council as vice-chairman (1926), chairman (1927–1929), and treasurer (1930–1931) (Fisher, 1993, p. 272). Mitchell was a Columbia professor (1913–1944) with a Ph.D. from Chicago (1899). His influence at the time may be inferred from his presidencies at the American Statistical Association (ASA) (1918) and AEA (1924), his role in establishing the New School, in 1919, and the NBER, in 1920, and his various attachments to public agencies, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Price Section of the War Industries Board, the National Planning Board of Roosevelt's National Resources Board, and the Committee on Social Trends (Kuznets, 1949). In his research, Mitchell's approach was eminently empirical. Using statistics, Mitchell discussed issues such as American economic history (Mitchell, 1897, 1910b, 1919a), price index numbers (Mitchell, 1915), and business cycles (Mitchell, 1913, 1922a). Accordingly, his advocacy of the application of statistics in the social sciences was wholehearted (see Mitchell, 1919b), as he believed "we must put our ultimate trust in observation" (Mitchell, 1925, pp. 11–12). Mitchell defended interlocking the social sciences as a means to improve the state of economics—something that he himself practiced in his work (see Mitchell, 1910a, 1919b). Furthermore, he recognized that the outcomes of economic processes were modified by factors such as "alternations of pessimism and optimism in judging a future always uncertain" (Mitchell, 1910b, p. 369), and that the "uncertainty attending present forecasts of business conditions arises chiefly from the imperfections of our knowledge concerning these conditions in the immediate past and present" (Mitchell, 1913, p. 588).

4 **A profile for the economist who practiced social science interdisciplinarity in times of uncertainty**

In a period marked by pluralism and the relative closeness of the social sciences (see Morgan; Rutherford, 1998), the group of ten individuals described above was an influential one. In addition to all their engagements in public service, eight of them served as presidents of the AEA (Mitchell 1924, Barnett 1932, Millis 1934, Johnson 1936, Hansen 1938, Slichter 1941, Wolfe 1943, and Knight 1950), whilst Mitchell was president of the ASA (1918) as well. Also, they represented the most prestigious American universities at the time of their involvement in the SSRC: all of them, except for New School's Alvin Johnson, worked in one of the Economics Graduate Departments listed in Keniston's (1959, p. 129) ranking for 1925—and since the New School was founded in 1919, its absence in the ranking is understandable. Of the top-8 economics departments, only Yale (5^{th}) failed to have an economist at the SSRC in the interwar period (see table 1). These elements, taken together, suggest that we are dealing with the elite of the profession, which is consistent with the pattern verified in the other social sciences as well.

With that in mind, this section seeks to explore the shared attributes in the approaches of these individuals to economics as a social science. Eight are the attributes commonly found in their work. By "commonly found," I mean features shared by at least seven of them. Exceptions are noted in parentheses at the end of each item.

First—and this is a given—it was consensual among them that economics would be improved by tighter interdisciplinary ties with the other social sciences. Second, eight of them actually exercised some sort of social science interdisciplinarity in their own work (Barnett, Hansen). It is true that disciplinary boundaries were much blurrier at the time than they are nowadays. Even so, these boundaries were clear enough to foster the establishment of independent learned societies, allowing us to regard this cross-fertilization as interdisciplinarity.

At this point, Stapleford's (2017) notion of "practices" may be useful to clear the air about what is meant by social science interdisciplinarity. Stapleford (2017, p. 117) defines practices as "collections of actions linked by teleology and normative accountability." These may be divided into higher-level and lower-level practices. Higher-level practices are formed by a range of lower-level ones. Within the group of social sciences, we take as higher-level practices those disciplines responsible for dictating in a teleological manner the purposes to be accomplished and the rules for normative validation. Among the seven disciplines which formed the SSRC, five may be strictly taken as such: anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology. History and statistics, on the other hand, are higher-level practices in and of themselves, but, when resorted to in the realm of the social sciences, may be taken as lower-level practices. Their purposes and rules for normative validation are set by the purposes and rules for normative validation of the other five disciplines. Therefore, the social science interdisciplinarity to which we refer here means an interlocking between the higher-level practices which dictate what is studied in the social sciences and why. In the case of the economist practicing social science interdisciplinarity, this means especially the use of insights from political science, psychology, and sociology in their economic reasoning.

The uses of history and statistics are also noteworthy shared features. They should be treated separately, though. In this sense, the next two shared features relate to the use of history and statistics in the search for more realism in economics. The third shared feature among our interdisciplinary economists is the notion that studying economic history is crucial to fathom both the evolution of the economy and how the current economic problems came into existence (Johnson, Knight, Secrist). The fourth relates to their reliance on statistics, which allowed them to quantify the current and past conditions of the economy, as well as attempt to forecast future scenarios (Knight, Millis). In the 1927 SSRC report to the AEA, for instance, Mitchell, Secrist, and Barnett wrote: "it is highly important to devise more adequate techniques for observing, measuring and recording samples of the numerous types of social experiments now in progress" (American Economic Association, 1927, p. 212). This use of statistics, however, ranged from simple data treatment to more complex analyses employing regression techniques, making it difficult to identify a proper standard across their works. This is in line with Backhouse's (1998) observation of the challenges in classifying works from this period, a challenge that diminished with the greater specialization in economics following World War II.

This reliance on economic history and statistics represents a commitment to empiricism, which, as per Judis (2000, p. 31), was consistent with a broader prevailing movement on behalf of elite organizations capable of supporting "policy based on fact and knowledge."

In a sense, moreover, the embrace of statistics, and, later on, of probability theory, was related to a broader and deeper movement of estrangement with the deterministic viewpoint that had been established in the discipline under the influence of nineteenth century mechanical physics (Qin, 1993). The fifth feature relates precisely to the acknowledgment that economics lacks deterministic certainty. Real-world uncertainty complicates economic analysis. Acknowledging uncertainty in theoretical discussions was therefore essential to building a more robust knowledge of economic issues, one that could help mitigate the adverse effects of uncertainty. Among the AEA representatives prevailed the idea that the future cannot be known with precision, and that economic processes cannot have their results known beforehand. It was precisely in the 1920s that uncertainty gained currency in economics, especially by the pens of Frank Knight, in *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit*, and John Maynard Keynes, starting with his *A Treatise in Probability*, also published in 1921. Accordingly, most of the AEA representatives relied on some notion of uncertainty, which they explicitly recognized as a critical condition economists had to deal with—even though the kinds of uncertainty and its centrality in their analyses differed (Barnett, Handman, Wolfe).

Sixth, we may notice among the most pressing issues in their agendas the question of labor, which was taken by some of them as the most urgent problem of the

1920s and 1930s (Knight, Mitchell, Secrist). This is not to be understood as labor economics à la Jacob Mincer—which would be anachronistic—but in the broader sense of industrial relations, a science-building, problem-solving field of inquiry which came into existence in the first decades of the twentieth century (Kaufman, 1993). By the 1920s, industrial relations had come to focus on employment relationships, on the causes of labor problems, and on the solution of these problems through administration and organization. The field covered, therefore, "labor legislation, labor history and industrial government, labor management, and causes and remedies of unemployment" (Kaufman, 1993, p. 10). We may define as labor economists those who, starting from economics, worked on these questions. In fact, as early as 1925, the CPP had recommended "certain significant phases of social and industrial relationships" as one of the most urgent research areas (American Economic Association, 1926, p. 345). In 1928, the SSRC produced an important report—benefitting from the direct involvement of Commons and Barnett—that helped delineate industrial relations as a distinct field of inquiry (Social Science Research Council, 1928; see Kaufman, 1993, pp. 12–17). Also, already in the 1920s, the SSRC established the Advisory Committee on Industrial Relations, whereas in the late 1930s it created the Labor Market Committee, responsible for sponsoring the Conference on Research on Industrial Relations, in 1939 (Kaufman, 1993, p. 220). Furthermore, Barnett, Hansen, Johnson, Mitchell, Slichter, and Wolfe, devoted some of their public service precisely to the issue of labor/industrial relations, such as in the US Commission on Industrial Relations.

Our seventh feature concerns their involvement in public service. Eight of these individuals demonstrated a strong commitment with public service, holding prominent positions in public agencies. This not only reaffirms their elite status within the profession but also highlights their willingness to address the practical issues of their time, rather than focusing solely on academic or theoretical matters (Knight, Secrist). This was actually in line with the agenda of the SSRC itself. As per the 1936 SSRC report to the AEA, the Council had "on occasion undertaken to render immediate public service by assembling at the disposition of public officials existing resources of knowledge and of men for the solution of technical problems" (American Economic Association, 1936, p. 315).

Finally, the eighth feature informs us that most of the AEA representatives had some connection with the institutionalist movement, as defined by Rutherford (2011) (Hansen, Knight, Secrist). Academically, institutionalism shared the stage with neoclassical economics in the interwar years in the US (see Morgan; Rutherford, 1998).

Topics covered by institutionalists included not only traditional economic issues, but also "conventions, customs, habits of thinking, and modes of doing which make up the scheme of arrangements which we call 'the economic order'" (Hamilton, 1919, p. 311). However, this movement extended far beyond the intellectual dimension, and comprised a network of individuals and institutions working toward broadly converging purposes, both in academic and political spheres. Therefore, the institutionalist movement aimed at combining science and social control. In Rutherford's (2011, p. 26) words:

Being scientific did mean being investigative, exposing hypotheses to critical empirical examination, and bringing economic thinking into line with recent developments in related disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, and philosophy. […] It also meant seeing theories and hypotheses as instruments for social control so that the concepts of science and social control merge together.

Mitchell is recognizably one of the greatest names of American institutionalism. Wolfe was "an institutionalist with progressive roots" (Fiorito, 2003, p. 451). Barnett, Millis, and Slichter—though not purebred institutionalists—are placed by Kaufman (1993, p. 207) in an "institutional school of labor economists," which focused on questions held dear by institutional economics, such as "labor's inequality of bargaining power, management's authoritarianism in industry, and the workers' economic insecurity" (Kaufman, 1993, pp. 32–33). Handman is mentioned by Rutherford both as a sociologist who "contributed to the development of institutionalism" (2009, p. 315) and, alongside Millis and Slichter, as a Chicago alumnus "who would become associated with institutionalism" (2011, pp. 132–133). In fact, Handman is named by Wolfe (1936, p. 192) himself as the one who probably coined the term "institutional economics," in a conversation with Veblen, in 1916.[11] Rutherford (2011, p. 348) also includes Johnson and Knight in a list of individuals who had "some degree of sympathy" for certain aspects of institutional economics. However, Johnson and Knight are identified as "sometimes critics of other aspects of institutionalism" as well, in a way that they could not be properly seen as "members of the American institutionalist movement themselves." In the case of Johnson, such an ambivalence led Colm (1968, p. 220) to define him as a neoclassical economist with social and institutional undertones. Furthermore, although not considered here as institutionalists, Hansen and Secrist obtained their Ph.Ds. from Commons' Wisconsin, whereas Knight was hired at Chicago to teach institutional economics.

11 Rutherford (2009, p. 317) offers another possibility for the origin for the term, tracing it back to Robert Hoxie, "who called himself an institutional economist."

From this summary, at last, we may sketch a profile for the economists who promoted social science interdisciplinarity in the interwar period. This average profile gathers the thematic, methodological, and theoretical traits commonly found within the elite group who represented the AEA at the SSRC during the 1920s and 1930s.

The economist who practiced social science interdisciplinarity in the interwar period embraced and applied social science interdisciplinarity in their work, integrating insights from various social sciences alongside economics. Their affinity for the institutionalist movement steered them away from abstract theorizing, favoring an empirical approach rooted in the economic realities of their time. By combining historical context with statistical analysis, they developed realistic approaches to economic issues. As realists, these economists recognized the central role of uncertainty in economic systems, highlighting the impracticality of predicting outcomes a priori. They were not confined to the ivory tower of academia; instead, they displayed a strong commitment to public service, actively engaging with contemporary economic challenges rather than focusing solely on abstract academic concerns. Among the pressing issues of their time, labor—encompassing the causes of unemployment, the functions of unions, and efficient personnel management in business—captured their attention the most.

It is important to note that this result would not have been different had we included the other six AEA representatives in our sample. Marshall and Nourse, for instance, exhibit all eight shared attributes, while Commons, Kuznets, and Stewart meet seven, and Davis meets five. Therefore, the shared attributes would remain consistent even if we considered all sixteen AEA representatives. Furthermore, the influential, elite profile holds true: four of the remaining six served as presidents of the AEA (Commons 1917, Nourse 1942, Davis 1944, and Kuznets 1954; Davis and Kuznets presided over the ASA in 1936 and 1949, respectively, and four of them came from one of the top-16 Economics Graduate Departments in Keniston's (1959) ranking—exceptions are Stewart, from the New School, and Nourse, from Brookings Institution (see table 1).

5 **Concluding remarks**

This paper offered a broad overview of the economists who practiced social science interdisciplinarity during the interwar years, a rich period for social science interdisciplinarity. It did not aim to provide a detailed account of who these men were, what they thought, or what they did. Instead, it juxtaposed the main features of their work to form a profile for the elite group of economists committed to social science interdisciplinarity in the 1920s and 1930s.

By doing this, we managed to boil down the profile of the economist prone to social science interdisciplinarity to eight features: defense and practice of social science interdisciplinarity, devotion to public service, concerns with labor, the use of economic history and statistics in research in several capacities, the recognition of uncertainty, and varied degrees of sympathy for institutional economics.

This overview, therefore, serves as an introductory account of the works of those responsible for fostering interdisciplinary relations between economics and the other social sciences, especially via the SSRC. The interwar years marked a watershed for the social sciences in the US, and the SSRC was a central cog in the transformations that occurred (Fisher, 1993, p. 4).

From the elements treated briefly in this paper, I hope to incite further investigation into more specific aspects of economics as an interdisciplinary social science during the interwar period and of the economists who practiced social science interdisciplinarity at that time. A hypothesis that merits closer examination in the future, for instance, is that the predisposition toward institutional economics may have served as the cohesive force binding these features together. Another is that the recognition of uncertainty as a systemic feature of capitalism—instead of as a particular trait of specific economic processes—gained prominence with the onset of the Great Depression and became a more pivotal concern for SSRC economists thereafter.

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