

Book Review

ETHICAL IMPERIALISM: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES, 1965–2009. By Zachary M. Schrag. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010. 245 pp. Hardbound, \$45.00.

Ethical Imperialism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences offers readers a critical overview of the history and impact of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) on the social sciences, with particular emphasis on the U.S. Zachary Schrag's methodology includes interviews with decision makers involved in the drafting of IRB policies and analysis of published and unpublished documents. The goal of the book is to determine how federal regulation of the social sciences came about and why it has taken on its particular shape; how universities have then applied the resulting federal laws; and finally how scholars across the social sciences are responding to the process of obtaining ethics approval from IRBs (6). The resulting work is an impressive assessment of IRBs, from their tenuous beginnings in the early 1960s as a practical response to a perceived threat to the public from medical research to its present status as a threat to academic freedom in the social sciences.

Schrag embeds his criticism of the application of IRBs to the social sciences within the IRB's origins in and relevance to the medical sciences. Schrag identifies the origins of IRBs with a series of medical research projects conducted near the end of World War II, in which the human rights of the participants were sacrificed by researchers who, in the push to discover cures for a host of illnesses, for example, harmed their subjects in very tangible ways (24–25). As public and academic outrage regarding the lack of concern for medical subjects increased, the National Institutes of Health and the Public Health Service began conducting formal inquiries into their own methods, ranging from experimental surgeries to the use of personality tests. This debate quickly spilled over into the social sciences, due to the investigators' failure to recognize that certain assumptions central to medical research (such as the tendency for the researcher to know more about their subjects' condition or the tendency to design experiments aimed at altering subjects' physical state or behavior) rarely hold true in the social sciences due to their less predictable and more reflexive nature (4). As a result of this misperception, the social sciences have fallen victim to *ethical imperialism*, a term introduced by ethicist Albert Jonsen to describe "the imposition of one field's rules onto another discipline" (9). Schrag contends that

in this instance ethical imperialism has resulted in the social sciences being unnecessarily constrained, and even silenced, by IRBs.

Schrag offers six key findings. First, his research demonstrates that today's IRB advocates lack empirical evidence of ethical abuses perpetrated by social scientists and therefore have no cause for regulating the field. Second, he finds that IRB policy makers failed to consider contemporary alternatives within the social sciences to encourage the ethical behavior of their members and the protection of their participants. Third, he reveals a troubling lack of representation of social scientists within the various official bodies responsible for setting IRB policy. With the exception of brief and ultimately unsuccessful confrontations between oral historians, led by Linda Shopes and Don Ritchie (152–59), Schrag finds shockingly few efforts on the part of the official bodies to include the expertise of social scientists when generating policies intended to govern their research. Fourth, he identifies “the creep of regulation” (189) as responsible for the inclusion of the social sciences under IRB jurisdiction, as opposed to a focused effort on the part of policy makers. Furthermore, Schrag suggests that the continued review of social scientific research by IRBs is a mistake that no one has attempted to fix. Fifth, he demonstrates that what is perceived as “the good old days” (190) of IRB review was characterized by a lack of IRB interference in social scientific research, as opposed to a period of more representative policies. Finally, Schrag's analysis supports the position that IRB policy makers have been inconsistent in their treatment of the social sciences due to fundamental misunderstandings of the goals of and methods used by social scientists. These findings lead Schrag to conclude that the “IRB review of the social sciences and the humanities was founded on ignorance, haste and disrespect” (192).

Each of these findings represents a significant contribution to those oral historians and related practitioners who would seek to challenge IRB's right and ability to adequately evaluate their research projects, particularly before the research has been conducted. In light of the vast collection of documents and interviews cited as evidence for his findings, Schrag is justified in calling “for Congress to relieve health regulators of the responsibility for overseeing the social sciences, a task they have mishandled for decades” (191). But what would present alternatives to IRB regulation look like? It is on this point that Schrag's analysis falls short. He expresses approval for the work of anthropologists (46–47) and oral historians (152–59) who have attempted to return responsibility for designing and implementing ethical research projects to the individual researcher and their immediate peers (who presumably will have a better understanding of the discipline and its foibles than the interdisciplinary representatives typically found on IRBs). Yet he is strangely silent regarding possible alternatives to IRBs.

Admittedly, the scope of his research was limited to providing an historical overview of the debates that have shaped IRB policy on a federal level, leaving social scientists with a valuable historical foundation from which to launch a new assault on the application of IRBs to their research. However, based on his analysis he is uniquely positioned to offer a series of recommendations for alternatives to IRBs, particularly for historians. As a result, the absence of even tentative suggestions proves unsatisfying. However, there is nothing stopping social scientists from taking the foundation established by Schrag and using it to challenge the status quo, developing alternatives to IRBs that are more appropriate to the needs common to each discipline.

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