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**Research Policy and the Social
Sciences: De-theorising Social
Research?**

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**Research Policy and the Social Sciences:
De-theorising Social Research?**

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Abstract

It has been observed that neo-liberal government policy works against critical social research by reducing higher education to vocational training, attacking not only the welfare state, unions and non-commodified public spheres with policies of deregulation, privatisation and commercialisation, but also silencing intellectual scholarship that introduces students and future workers to its anti-social effects and to their real predicament as exploited labour. This paper argues that liberalism has also seen what might be termed a 'bureaucratisation of social research', entailing not only a preference for specific neo-liberal economic problematisations of the social over previous welfare rationalities, but also a specific research rationale. Government policy prefers methodological approaches which claim to capture and represent the social to government in the name of its redemption. This policy vision for social research is not representative of traditional social science research, and implies a de-theorisation and homogenisation of social research. It is important to preserve social theory because it can provide a check on the power of truth by providing systems of knowledge and alternative methodologies for understanding the social world, and acting ethically within it.

Keywords:

This paper reflects on the move by governments in many parts of the West to promote what I term a bureaucratisation of social research. Within higher education policy documents emanating from the EU, Canada, the UK and Australia the social sciences and humanities are referred to purely in terms of their role in supporting government to solve social problems. Social research is charged with the role of producing information and ‘evidence’ about the condition of the population that can be used to solve the social and economic problems faced by government. Within these policy documents, the social sciences are urged to produce information in a language that is immediately accessible to government, and in a form which is ‘objective’ or stripped of ‘subjective’ bias. The social sciences and humanities are represented and legitimised *solely* in terms of the assistance they provide to government in its attempts to bring about socially desirable ends. There is also the push for social experts to work in a direct way with the community and with business, evident in the policy emphasis on the accountability of research to its ‘end users’. The role of the humanities, or of research projects which do not aim to produce utilities for government or for end users, do not appear, or very rarely appear, within government higher education policy documents. The word ‘humanities’ is largely absent within the policy documents. There are also frequent references to the value and importance of interdisciplinary research which is seen to carry especial benefits in solving social and economic problems. So part of reducing research to a governmental function involves sidelining the disciplines, discipline language, and the more traditional understanding of research as being accountable to the disciplines. Research is in effect being redefined as a social accountability, rather than as knowledge produced in and for an academic discipline. Within policy documents, there is hardly a word said about research which does not produce information and knowledge to secure social benefits. It is as though there is no other role for research.

This is simply to say that higher education policy invites the social sciences to play an active role in producing information for government and in improving the lives of ordinary people by determining the ways in which social and economic problems and solutions will be understood and addressed in different contexts. This is not in itself a bad thing. However, the paper raises two problems with reducing *all* social research to this kind of function.

The first is that the policy vision for social research is not representative of the ways in which the social sciences as a whole have traditionally approached research. The social sciences have different philosophies and objectives to the kind of bureaucratic science I have just described. Policy assumes that research is a practice of direct observation; you see the thing, record the facts and report them. But, for instance, interpretive research argues that human beings actively make or shape the meanings we use to interpret ‘facts’, and they aim not to gather facts, but to understand culture ‘from the inside’, perhaps with an emphasis on the way that language mediates social interaction and meaning making. Critical theory and phenomenology also see that meaning is culturally produced; they emphasise the need to understand phenomenon and experience directly, in a way that is unmitigated by culture. Critical theorists may aim for

instance to understand the way that ideology obscures 'real social interests', or the way that self-consciousness and self-interest are brought into effect by the cultural system, and they interrogate apparently 'natural' desires and rights in order to foreground an emancipatory consciousness. Postmodernists also reject the idea that the social world and human behaviour can be directly observed, and they aim to deconstruct the language or metaphorical dependencies upon which knowledge rests, or to trace the historical interrelationships between ideas and practices which shape what we come to think about as normal or inevitable.

But even philosophies like realism which would have some broad agreement with the kind of philosophy assumed within policy documents, do not aim simply to represent and solve social problems. Realism in social research is typically more interested in producing systematic explanations of discipline objects of inquiry, and these explanations would not typically lend themselves to immediate application in a policy field. Bureaucratic science of the kind envisaged in higher education policy is a pragmatic affair which focuses on the provision of objective facts for the purposes of solving specific kinds of popularly understood social problems. In none of the social science paradigms, is the aim expressed in terms of producing facts and offering a set of recommendations for arranging things better to achieve certain social outcomes. So a bureaucratisation of social research would essentially transform the social sciences and humanities into something unrecognisable from what they have traditionally been. Instead of containing many theoretical paradigms which attempt to explain and understand culture and society, social research would become homogenised and de-theorised, reduced to providing information to government, or solving socially defined problems.

A second problem with a bureaucratisation of social research has to do with what might be termed the politics of discourses of objectivity. Higher education policy is underpinned by assumptions about the objectivity of research knowledge, and objectivity is also the name in which government and social expertise authorise their actions in the social domain. Both governments and social experts assure us that interventions in the social field are legitimate because they are based on 'neutral scientific knowledge' or on 'objective facts' about the best interests of the population. But of course, history reminds us that many scientific interventions have proven themselves to be misguided, or even dangerous, often producing unintended effects.

In order to be able to challenge the monopoly of 'scientific truth' on social regulation, it must be possible to challenge the objectivity of knowledge. And in order to understand how science is itself subjective it is important to be able to trace its history, the possible interests it serves, and the way it is shaped by existing cultural paradigms, and we need to consider its possible effects in specific times and places and from specific points of view. This is what interpretive, Critical and postmodern paradigms in the social sciences and humanities do. They are interested in the dependency of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, on culture, stereotypes, ideology, power, institutional practices, political interests and language. These paradigms within the social

sciences have an important role to play in providing a check on the power of truth, and they do this by providing systems of knowledge and alternative methodologies for understanding the social world, and acting ethically within it. The social sciences also provide a check on their own claims to truth in the form of Critical sociologies of the disciplines, or postmodern thought which deconstructs or historicises Western knowledge systems. Without this kind of scholarship which reflects on the contingency of knowledge, science attains a validity which operates universally without any consideration being given to how its own practices are regulated and conditioned. As Luc Nancy (2002:66) puts it, we need to be concerned about a 'freer freedom' than the freedom to reflect objectivity — and that is the freedom to question the formation and possibility of objective knowledge and to question its authority to prescribe social practices.

To support this kind of freedom, and to retain their autonomy from government, social research needs to protect, and possibly revive, traditional theorising in social research. And I think an important part of this is learning to value both objective and subjective methodologies in social research, because they both play an important role in a free society.

References

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