

COMMISSION ON THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

NOTES FROM THE MEETING ON 15.12.00

These notes are neither a formal record of the discussion that took place at the introductory, 'ground clearing' meeting nor a record of decisions taken (there were none, in any formal sense). Instead they report the main conclusions - as they appeared to me - and include suggestions as to the way forward (in italics) for the Commission (some of which were explicit at the meeting, some implicit, and others inferred by me afterwards). Some specific points which were raised are summarised in the annex.

I. The Context

It was noted that the Chair had a clear agreement from the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences (The Academy) that the report would be owned by the Commission although published by the Academy. There was considerable discussion as to its intended purpose and readership. The purpose was both to promote strengths wherever they existed and to identify weaknesses and ways of obviating them. As a consequence, the audience would include social scientists themselves (both academics and practitioners), users (including potential users) of social science - notably but not only government, and a wider audience (characterised as 'Economist readers and Radio 4 Today listeners'). Such a disparate audience would prove difficult.

There was general agreement that the Commission's report should begin with a clear, positive statement of the nature, breadth and rationale of the social sciences, together with an evaluation of their current condition in the UK. No attempt was made to write a definition by committee, but it was generally agreed that it should stress disciplined curiosity about individuals in groups, thereby creating social knowledge (including the appropriation of knowledge produced and held by others in society), which can be used by society to change itself.

It was generally agreed that the introductory chapter(s) should set UK social science in context, both historical (its institutionalisation in the 20th century; key reports - Crawford, Rothschild, HOSS, Gulbenkian etc) and comparative. There will need to be discussion of the various disciplines which comprise the social sciences, but the stress should be on the total enterprise rather than the separate parts, on common goals rather than disciplinary barriers.

The nature of social science could be illustrated with reference to a small number of 'case studies' - for example: the development of the theory of auctions which was used by the government in licensing radio frequencies; the contributions of psephologists (e.g. David Butler, Ivor Crewe, John Curtice, Tony King) to the understanding of voting behaviour; Amartya Sen's work on famines; Peter Hall's work on the urban condition; the development and wide use of GIS in data storage, manipulation and analysis. We have a lot of good work to celebrate.

Do we need to:

* Begin drafting these chapters now, with perhaps some research assistance tracking down relevant source materials etc?

2. The Public Understanding of Social Science

A major problem facing social science is a lack of public appreciation of its nature and methods, which means that social scientists are often not called to comment on, and contribute to policy formulation regarding, issues such as public reactions to BSE and GM experimentation.

Is there a case for:

- * Commissioning research on public and élite understandings of social science; and, possibly thereafter,
- * Recommending a programme designed to improve those understandings (along the lines of the Royal Society's Public Understanding of Science programme?)

3. On Social Science in Education.

As a key function of social science is to promote social understanding, it is crucial that social science is a core component in the country's educational system. Concerns were expressed regarding the falling number of students taking some social science (broadly defined) GCSE and A-levels, and the 'dumbing-down' of curricula.

Is there a case for:

- * Commissioning research on social science in school curricula; and possibly thereafter
- * Recommending a campaign to promote more social science in schools, as a key component of society learning about itself?

4. The Current Condition of Academic Social Science

The future health of UK social science, and hence of UK social understanding, resides in the Universities. Many concerns have been expressed about this - such as the almost complete absence of UK-national PhD students in economics, and the impact of the RAE on the nature of social science research (about which there are many untested myths).

Is there a case for:

- * Commissioning research on the impact of the RAE on social science research; and
- * Collaborating with others (THE ACADEMYAcademicians and member Societies; ESRC and the major funding charities; etc) in a survey of the current condition of social science research in the universities?

In addition, much social science research (some, though not all, of it 'nearer-market' than that undertaken in universities) is conducted in a range of non-public-sector institutions.

Is there a case for:

- * Commissioning a review of all bodies that undertake social science research; and
- * Collaborating with them in a survey of their views on the current situation (the availability of researchers with particular skills etc.)?

There is considerable concern among some social scientists regarding approaches to social knowledge. This is perhaps most acute in the - apparently common - belief that there is a dearth of trained researchers in quantitative studies and considerable alienation between those identified with 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches. With the exception of some disciplines, it is commonly believed that the 'qualitative' approaches are not only in the ascendancy but also that their protagonists seek to 'undermine' the quantitative (through their exclusion from degree curricula, for example). Much of this set of beliefs is anecdotal, however. Before proceeding to discuss whether the Commission should address some of its remarks to social scientists with regard to accommodation and pluralism - if it wants to! - is there a case for:

* Commissioning research among social scientists to establish the extent (if any) of the problem and appreciations of various approaches/epistemologies etc?

It was also argued that we have a far from clear understanding of the contexts within which good social science is produced. There are general beliefs (outwith if not within the academy) in the economies of scale, but these need testing. Similarly, with the growth of inter-disciplinarity and the decline in single-author research/publication strategies, we need to develop appreciations of how successful networks evolve. Thus is there a case for:

* Commissioning research into how research 'happens', so that mechanisms can be proposed that ensure adequate contexts - without constraining innovation?

5. Social Science and its Users

Although social science has a wide remit in promoting the understanding of society and enabling social change, at least part of its *raison d'être* in the contemporary UK is to undertake 'applied/contract research' for a range of users - many, though far from all, of them in the public sector. Beliefs were expressed that, at best, the two sides (social scientists and users) have only partial understandings of each other - with governments, for example, portraying social scientists as 'left-wing, not understanding the policy process, and unable to provide advice quickly'. (Of course, some users - notably though not only politicians - think that they do understand even if they don't, a problem that may be greater for social than natural scientists because of the greater deference to the latter and their specialised knowledge!)

Part of this 'conflict' may be a result of ignorance on behalf of users (potential and actual) who lack awareness of the breadth of social understanding produced and stored by social scientists (much of it 'locked up in small-circulation, peer-reviewed journals', to quote David Walker). There is a need to generalise this 'esoteric knowledge' for wider, user audiences, an important component of any 'public understanding of social science' programme. At the same time there is much potentially valuable research material held 'outwith' the social sciences which we should seek to 'liberate'.

There are beliefs among social scientists that - whatever their own shortcomings in producing generalisations of esoteric knowledge - they lack vehicles in which such public understanding (back to Economist readers and Today listeners) can be promoted, other than as 'instant reactions' to current events. There have been some discussions regarding the possibility of a 'relaunch' of a periodical along the lines of the former New Society, through which wider media appreciation of social science findings could be diffused - as happens for other disciplines through, for example, media attention to articles in journals such as New Scientist, Nature, Science, The Lancet, and the BMA Journal. Is there a case for:

* Pressing that proposal, perhaps in collaboration with other bodies (e.g. the Rowntree Trusts)?

Some social scientists seem better able to gain media attention than others - usually because of their preparedness to appear at short notice and give a 'sound-bite opinion' - and it was observed that it may well be that those best able to get messages across effectively are not also the 'movers and shakers' within disciplines. In addition, some learned societies (such as the Royal Economic Society, the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers, and the British Psychological Society) are more successful at getting media attention for their annual conferences and other events, as are some researchers (e.g. the annual publications of the British Social Attitude Surveys). Is there therefore a case for:

* The Commission meeting some of those involved in successful media campaigns, perhaps with the goal of proposing how the social sciences as a whole - through THE ACADEMY- might develop a 'public profile' mechanism?

6. 'Surveying' the Constituency

In developing its appreciation of the important issues and considering how to incorporate them into its report, the Commission will undoubtedly want to consult a wide range of individuals on specific issues. To what extent might it also want to consult the 'community of social scientists' more generally? Some social scientists are aware of the Commission's existence and terms of reference, and have hopes regarding its report; others are less aware (even unaware), but are likely to respond when the report is produced - perhaps arguing that it has failed to consider important issues and opinions! Should the Commission therefore explicitly seek comments and contributions, using THE ACADEMY's member societies to make contacts? And whereas some individuals may respond with written submissions, might the Commission not achieve more by holding a series of 'open meetings' - for groups of Universities, at the annual conferences of learned societies etc.

* Should the Commission seek opinion widely, such as by holding open meetings at conferences and other venues and meet disciplinary representatives?

In addition, the existence of the Commission might provide an opportunity to explore issues of social science promotion/representation. Thus

* Should the Commission actively seek the opinion of social scientists of how their status and role in society should be promoted and represented?

7. The missing bits

We were acutely conscious that this is light on the practitioner domain and an overseas perspective. We look to our colleagues who could not be at the first meeting to correct any shortcomings in these and other regards.

Ron Johnston
Secretary to the Commission

Annex I Some specific points raised in discussion

A. What is Social Science about and who is it for?

- * How do we know? (e.g. by bibliometric analysis of social scientists' work (tautologous), opinions of key individuals)
- * Better to define social science by what we study, rather than how we do it or the present divisions of academic labour (e.g. disciplines). Our attempt to categorise all or parts of Economics, Sociology, Political Science/International Relationships, Education, Anthropology Business/Management/Industrial relations as Core and the rest (e.g. Geography, Psychology, Law, History) as Peripheral met with great scepticism
- * Social science = 'disciplined curiosity about societies in which we live' (DW)?
- * Clearly not just academic social science BUT social science characteristics very different in schools c.f. universities and practice
- * Creation and sharing of social knowledge (what is it?) is crucial to social science

B. Perceptions /expectations / drivers of social science

- * The media: wants topical, focused news and good explicators
- * Government, especially central government: typically very instrumentalist, wants quick answers, believes social science is mostly applied common sense?? Generally likes economists, technologists. Sociologists out of favour. Recent trend towards Evidence-led policy?
- * The academic community: deeply suspicious of desire for 'quick fixes'. Often very disciplinary-oriented. RAE forces publication in prestigious journals. Little experience of real policy world.
- * Practitioners exploiting social science
- * The public. Bemused by social science other than headlines in Sun? Fed up with questionnaires...
- * Intermediary bodies (e.g. Think Tanks) selectively exploit academic research
- * Overseas equivalents of all the above

C. Social Science research

- * Collaborative research now much more common
- * Agglomeration into research centres (has it worked well?)
- * Interdisciplinary work now more common (effect of Information and Communication Technologies?)
- * RAE effects, including multi-author works in prestigious journals as career enhancing factors, resultant status differentiation
- * Immediacy versus 'good research' (not what MORI, Think Tanks generally do!)
- * Different concepts of what constitutes 'research' (e.g. in TV journalism is often collation of media reports with only modest critical assessment?)

D. Employability of social scientists

- * Some evidence (e.g. Warwick and Canadian studies that this is very good). How do we find out more? How does it vary within the social sciences? What creates employability?

E. The health of the social sciences

* What methodology is best used to assess this? Can we use RAE results to give measure of academic social sciences research quality (probably not)? Will Heads of Departments opinions be inherently biased? How do we get a decent measure of informed user satisfaction?

Annex 2 Material already known to be directly relevant to the Commission's work

Emails on the work of the Commission received from Academicians up to 12 December 2000

Press Notice from British Academy on the UK-wide review of graduate studies in the humanities and social sciences.

Institute of Education (1992) 'Support for Social Sciences: setting the scene'. Report for ESRC. ISBN 0 85473 361 2

Marshall G (2000) 'UK capacity in quantitatively-based social science and analytical economics'. ESRC, Swindon

Oba J (1999) 'The social sciences in OECD countries: key data'. In 'The social sciences at a turning point'. Proceedings of OECD workshop held in Paris in April 1998, pp11-27.

OECD (2000) 'Social Sciences for a digital world: building infrastructure for the future'. Report of the Ottawa Workshop on the Social Sciences in October 1999. OECD DSTI/STP (2000)14

Wallerstein I (1996) Restructuring of the Social Sciences. Report of the Gulbenkian Commission, Stanford University Press.