

## **Social science must change to realise its full value, says John Brewer**

Social scientists have nothing to fear from the impact agenda, but must be more willing to talk to “strangers” such as the government in order to realise their full value, Professor John Brewer AcSS said.

Professor Brewer gave the Academy of Social Sciences Annual Lecture on Thursday (4 July 2013), speaking on ‘The public value of the social sciences’ before an audience of 70 academicians and others. He has had a book of the same title published recently.

“Let me begin controversially,” he told the audience. “I firmly believe that social science has nothing to fear from the impact debate. Social science is highly impactful in the government’s limited sense, probably more so than any of the three cultures in British intellectual life.” It was the difficulty in measuring the impact of social science for the REF exercise which had created anxieties, rather than the lack of impact, he said.

“Impact, however, is also the wrong debate for us to be having. I believe if we want to discuss the benefit and worth of social science, we should couch the debate in terms of ‘value’ not ‘impact’.”

By this he meant not just social science’s value in terms of its ability to save our society money, but also in its usefulness and moral worth.

“Price is a very poor and limited measure of our value. For one thing, it is very difficult to accurately calculate price value: how do we calculate the cost of the social sciences compared to their economic benefits?”

Instead he spoke about the “normative” value of the social sciences, by which he meant the way that an education in the social sciences enhanced the life of a student, and also the way that social science “reveals evidence about society and how society needs to adapt to deal with the complex problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

Social science “addresses the moral and social sensibilities that make society possible in the first place. The social sciences are the way in which society can find out about itself and in so doing generate the very idea of society itself.

“Social science makes people aware of themselves as comprising a society, helping in the development and dissemination of key social values that make society possible – social sensibilities like trust, empathy, tolerance, compromise and a sense of solidarity.

“The social sciences help us understand the conditions which both promote and undermine these values, and identifies the sort of public policies, behaviours and relationships in culture, the market and the state to ameliorate their absence and restore and repair them.

“This means that social science is a public good in its own right, for nothing else than it generates a moral sentiment by making society aware of its social nature, which cultivates a

sympathetic imagination towards others, including distant others, that enables society to know itself. Social science teaching and learning has civilising, humanising and cultural effects.”

However, “it is not inevitable that social scientists will practise this form of social science. Social science needs to change to meet the challenge of realising this normative public value in the 21st century. We need to develop strategies for teaching, research and civic engagement that attempt to deal with the complex problems facing global society in the future.

“This requires social scientists to work alongside those who in the past they have considered strangers, including governments, business, policy-makers, natural scientists, medics and humanities scholars.

“Collaborating effectively with strangers requires the practice of post-disciplinarity, in which social science collaborates with other broad subject areas to let the nature of the issue determine the perspective, not old disciplinary loyalties.”

To do this social scientists needed to overcome the “balkanization of social science [where] each subject has responded to perceived threats by practising disciplinary closure, to the point where the separate social science disciplines exist now almost in bunkers as ‘ourselves alone’.”

He said that social scientists’ engagement should “go upwards to the powerful as well as downwards to organic communities of the powerless, speaking truth both to those in power and to the disempowered.”

To do this, social scientists would have to go beyond “the comfort of quiet reflection and of our offices, and the reassurance of our books,” he said.

“I do think if social science is to make itself relevant to the 21st century and deal with some of the complex problems that face humanity in the future we have got to start running the risk of putting our head above the parapet.

“It is my view that social scientists everywhere need to be asking themselves questions about the public value of what they do, and trying to make themselves relevant, in some way or other, to the many global challenges that lie ahead.

“That means we might well offend people who in the past we could ignore. But we have to start relating to strangers: trying to engage with those in the past who we considered beyond the pale.

“If we are to make a difference to the global crises, we have no alternative. What that means is that social scientists need to develop thick skins, and develop a resilience against the criticism that we might face in the public sphere.”

He said that he had written his recent book because he wanted to “challenge the terms of the public debate by showing there’s more than economic benefits in the value of social science. But I also wanted to emphasise that if we are to realise that public value, social science has to change.

“I also think it’s not just us who need to change: governments need to change the way they see social science as having a rather utilitarian contribution to make to government policy.”

He said there was a “reflexive debate” going on within the humanities, and to a lesser extent within the natural sciences, about their value.

“I don’t think there is the same sort of debate going on within the social sciences – we haven’t yet got our Stefan Collini or Martha Nussbaum. Social sciences are some way behind the humanities and natural sciences in beginning to debate their public value.

“That’s because we have responded so well to the impact agenda and we’ve responded so well to the attack upon the public university – we need now to expand the terrain on which we argue this case. That’s why I recommend we move the terms of the debate away from impact and to value.”

He said public engagement should not be carried out at the end of research projects, but be built into them from the start. He also believed that the traditional tutorial-lecture format of teaching had become tired, and that the classroom should be taken more into the public sphere to break down barriers between the public and the university.

The lecture preceded the annual general meeting of the Academy, and the presentation of certificates to new Academicians, including David Blunkett MP.

- Professor Brewer HDSocSci, MRIA, FRSE, AcSS, FRSA, is Professor of Post Conflict Studies at Queen’s University Belfast. He is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, an Academician in the Academy of Social Sciences, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He is a former President of the British Sociological Association. The lecture was chaired by Professor James Wilsdon.

[More on the lecture, and on the event](#)