

EXAGGERATED CLAIMS?

THE ESRC, 50 YEARS ON

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INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY

In 50 years the UK's social science research funder has paid for prodigious amounts of knowledge. But 'for whom' and 'for what' are questions too rarely posed since its birth in the optimistic social democratic circumstances of the mid-1960s. Its history pivots around producing knowledge that passes muster among academics in their disciplines and expecting social science research to address specific problems in economy and society. At its birth, warnings were heard about 'exaggerated claims' by the social sciences. They were prescient. The knowledge it pays for is, often, antinomian, autistic and disconnected from the rest of the state's apparatus for generating socio-economic insight.

If you believe academics are disinterested seekers after knowledge, this book may annoy you. If you see universities as repositories of truth and their work self-justifying, the sceptical tone may offend.

If you believe disciplinary knowledge should be reserved for the initiated (their PhD a minimal requirement to voice opinions on internal matters), you will cry trespass. My adage comes from the distinguished American applied social scientist Richard Nathan. The conduct of social science research is not only a matter of what social science can do for the real world. It is also very much a matter of what the real world can do for social science (Nathan, 1998).

An account of the 50 years of the UK's research council for social science is inescapably about universities. And so it's about the research commissioners' impotence over trends both within universities and the higher education system: massification, bureaucratisation, intensification of specialisation and the incompatibility of subject departments and dedicated (preferably multidisciplinary) research centres and units. It did not have to be. Those who willed the council into existence thought it should be more than a facilitator of work by academics.



The knowledge they believed the UK needed could and should be produced plurally, even competitively in freestanding research centres, even in-house. Within a few years they admitted defeat. The subsequent history shows the tensions between academics producing knowledge that passes muster in their disciplines and those (ministers, MPs, media, think tanks, interest groups, business firms) who expect social science research to address the problems they confront. How knowledge is labelled is usually irrelevant to them; what matters is its utility and applicability – which academics think jeopardise their autonomy in defining what knowledge is. By autonomy they mean monopoly. Problems, societal issues, grand challenges – whatever we call them – ‘are essentially public ones’; they ought ‘to be debated in hybrid in which there is no entrance ticket in terms of expertise’ (Gibbons et al., 1994: 148). Wishful thinking; these authors (including the protean Martin Trow) dreamt of ‘participatory science’ where ‘the goal is no longer truth per se but responsible public decision making based upon understanding complex situations where many key uncertainties remain to be resolved’. Reaching that goal would take demolition of much of the apparatus of academic knowledge production – and a cognitive revolution on the part of the state: both are above the research council’s pay grade.

What to call this quango, which survived assassination in the 1980s only by shape shifting from the Social Science Research Council to a new identity as the Economic and Social Research Council? What’s in a name? A lot: retreat from a wider, continuous conversation about social science that such a body, if anyone, should carry; intellectual thralldom to one discipline, economics, rendering its ideology, its omissions and its pretensions off limits. Here, let’s abbreviate and call it *the Council* except in explicit pre- and post-1984 contexts.

Another problem is Macavity. As the knowledge economy changed, it often seemed the Council wasn’t there. But because there was (and remains) nobody else to voice social science as a collective endeavour, it went unspoken. The print of the UK government’s other agencies for social science was usually also hard to detect, including the Central Statistical Office and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (now the Office of National Statistics), research committees inside government departments, the Bank of England and so on. The Council’s non-relationship with these other bodies is looked at in Chapter 2.

Silence may be the fate of research funders, in the middle, squeezed between disciplines, universities and academics on the one side and government, decision makers, media and society on the other; their ‘brand’ is fated to be pallid. It took a long time for the Council to define its purposes and even now there remains ambiguity about its mission – bound up with

issues of cognitive hierarchy and epistemology. As for 'representation' of the activity doing social science it

cannot be a spokesperson ... because it has simultaneously to represent the merits of social sciences research to its paymaster, regulate what is acceptable in much of the research, allocate government's money and ensure good value for the public funds which it allocates ... it is not independent enough of government to provide the necessary advice. (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003: 105)

These points need unpacking (see Chapters 2 and 6). Here, let's note the ESRC's logo for 2015 says '50 years shaping society' and agree two things:

1. Knowledge has causal strength. States have believed this for centuries, which is why control of data and information are such persistent themes. The UK state evidently believes it, for how else to explain the enforcement on the ESRC of 'purdah', during the 2015 UK general election or, in September 2014, the Scottish independence referendum? Universities and research units are not banned from publicising findings in the weeks before elections or referendums provided they 'avoid reference to the ESRC as a source of the funding'. Anonymous knowledge is permitted; knowledge produced by a government body (whose *raison d'être* is knowledge production) is not.
2. The way social science knowledge does 'shape society' – exert any causality – is barely understood. It is the subject of assertion, rhetoric and assumption, but despite recent fuss about impact, few social scientists or the Council have bothered much with the sociology of research-generated knowledge. This is a history from which self-reflexivity is largely absent. Metaphors abound to capture the ways knowledge enters consciousness (unconsciously) but empirical studies, even retrospective 'Agatha Christie' narratives in which actors are asked what they knew and when, are few and far between. How many times writers lazily cite that passage from Keynes about decision makers in business catching something from the air that in fact stems from 'academic scribblers' way back. Is knowledge really so evanescent, the history of ideas so impenetrable that we can't get a better grip on how much and how far yesterday's research may still be present today? Perhaps – heretical thought – social science knowledge is only fitfully cumulative; it is instead episodic, context-dependent, specific to institutions, immanent – not (as 'science' believes) transcendent. More in Chapter 7.

PRODIGIOUS GROWTH

Most indices show the expansion of knowledge over the half-century. Not all. The proportion of GDP spent on research and development has dropped, from 2.3 per cent in 1965 to around 1.7 per cent in 2014. But since 1965 Council spending on social science has outstripped growth in GDP by about three to one. From just over 2 per cent of total research council spending 50 years ago, the ESRC now gets 6 per cent. Growth in the 'products of knowledge' has been tumultuous. To take only one discipline, sociology, since the 1960s the professional association has created three new journals; to them should be added many commercially published journals, in the UK and abroad. A telling sign of the intensification of specialist knowledge is the increase in the ratio of papers given at conferences to attendance at them, rising from 9 per cent in 1965 to 55 per cent at the turn of the century (Platt, 2003: 53). Postgraduate numbers have risen along with social science staff in UK universities, though accounting is made difficult because people are doing social science under a variety of labels, including business and health. The estimated value of social science research from all sources – university grants, research council, foundations, government departments, etc. – has grown from £120 million in the mid-1960s by at least a factor of five. Incidental improvements include the productivity of Council staff, measured both by total spending per head and grants awarded per head (neither of which, like most statements about public sector productivity, are especially meaningful).

By the late 1970s, observers extolled the 'sheer volume of research and publication ... units, groups, teams, serviced by an infrastructure of information and computing beyond the imaginings of a mere 25 years ago' (Cherns, 1979: 86). The point could be made today about the past quarter-century. But what relationship does the vast outpouring of books, articles, blogs, papers, presentations by academic social scientists – some of it paid for through the Council, but not always identifiable as such – have to decision making, understanding and daily practice in institutions, households or by individuals? There you have the 'impact' question, which in various guises will tease us through this book. Efforts to answer it made by the ESRC and the funders of higher education are both puny and strangely recent. For years, it seems, academics have researched, grants have been awarded, university departments shrunk and expanded without much evidence or even curiosity about whether the knowledge being generated was available (to other than its authors), let alone informing understanding or behaviour. The Heyworth Committee asked the question, its secretary reported,

but received no satisfactory answers. It was clear that the actual processes whereby research influenced action were not well understood either by researchers or by administrators. Nor were they aware that they did not know that there was any problem. Time and again a line of questioning by Heyworth evoked blank incomprehension. (Cherns, 1969: 122)

ANTINOMIAN KNOWLEDGE

Social self-knowledge veers towards the antinomian, which Daniel Bell once cited among the cultural contradictions of capitalism (Bell, 1972). Put the point another way. 'Users' are magpies. They don't know where this piece of intelligence/concept/perception comes from, but if it suits their material purpose, they will put it to use. *Academic* knowledge demands certification; academics are celebrants at the cult of the reference. *Action* has to be cognitively eclectic. Here is a recipe for perennial tension between 'evidence' (as academics see it) and executive decision. Where does the Council fit? Is it a mere underlabourer, providing the money so the academics can attest to the quality of the knowledge they produce, or should it side with the users in their eclecticism? Its administrative fate (a choice necessitated by the strength of the universities and the peculiar indifference of the UK state towards data and analysis) has been the former.

This picture is too Manichean, some might say: users can cohabit with academics. This is the official view. 'User inputs feed in at several different levels – the setting of priority themes, selection of new programmes' (Alsop, 1999: 12). But 'the ESRC is careful to ensure that the input of users into assessment does not become a diktat on agenda, methods or outcome' (Alsop, 1999: 12). But what, in this view, is the nature of the conversation between user and producer: is it mutually respectful, epistemologically egalitarian? What actually takes place – if it takes place – is rarely that.

Knowledge for and in government is diverse and undifferentiated. For example, the ESRC supports research on retailing. It says it has helped transform thinking (ESRC, 2014a). The Cameron coalition said it cared about the high street and, though it disliked overt intervention in markets, expressed an interest in shops; Mary Portas was appointed retail tsar. In October 2013 BIS produced a Strategy for Future Retail (BIS, 2013). The knowledge base would be provided by BIS itself, retail sector bodies, retailers, the retail sector skills council and ... the research councils. No hierarchy. No cognitive privilege. All hands to the pumps. In the eyes of users (in this instance, the Whitehall department responsible for the ESRC) knowledge attested by the research bodies is not prime.



Another example. The Magenta Book (HM Treasury, 2011) offers officials in-depth guidance on how evaluation should be designed and undertaken. The treatise acknowledges the ESRC, its data sets and work on research methods. These belong to the 'infrastructure' of social knowledge, which the ESRC supports. So the Council is visible, but how *central*? It's a player, but one among several; ONS and the Bank of England also support the socio-economic knowledge infrastructure. The government itself collects and analyses socio-economic data, which it analyses in-house and through semi-independent agencies such as the Office for Budget Responsibility. It's not clear what the division of labour might be between various knowledge organisations or whether the knowledge user/disseminator (HM Treasury) particularly cares.

This is more than a rehash of where to locate the boundary between 'fundamental' and applied work. The Treasury reputedly relied on ESRC-supported theoretical work on auctions when it sold off G3 spectrum, allowing one of the academics involved somewhat immodestly to claim the financial gains would pay for public spending on social science for years (Binmore, 2003: xviii). But if (as some say) there is only knowledge awaiting use and knowledge in use, academics will assert command of the criteria for allocating support, for only they know what is 'interesting'.

The Magenta Book mentions an econometric evaluation of the Labour government's New Deal programme; it's a sophisticated piece of social science work (DWP, 2003). This is knowledge in use. Would the ESRC have made a grant for something similar? Or is its role in the basement of the edifice, assuming systemic responsibility for the quality of the social science employed? It doesn't seem so. 'We are concerned about the future capacity for research outside universities given the academic focus of ESRC-funded research training', the Commission on the Social Sciences concluded (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003: 8). There is a community of applied researchers, even a proto-professional body (the Social Research Association). If these bodies police standards and enforce quality control, the ESRC is not readily identifiable as a coadjutor.

If there is a UK social science *system*, it is disarticulated and nobody, certainly not the research council, oversees or lubricates it, except through regulating the flow of social science postgraduates and certain limited interventions in universities, offering opportunities to researchers. If Sharon Witherspoon, former director of the Nuffield Foundation, is right and there is a deficiency in funding work in between the data infrastructure and practice, whose concern should that be (Witherspoon, 2015)? Who inspects how research findings at large get communicated to policy makers and their intellectual standards? Do we treat as



equivalent a story from a public relations firm offering the findings from a survey of 100 people and a research report emanating from a properly weighted sample survey involving thousands? Who should apply tests and quality control if not a social science research council?

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH – WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The Council and its processes for knowledge production have barely been studied. We need more research on research (Wilsdon et al., 2015) because in self-reflexivity lies the basis of strategy. The study of research systems is poorly funded in the UK. Here's a causal proposition: different (research) workplaces promote different (social) science. It was worth exploring in the 1970s when the state of knowledge concerning even the basic parameters and dynamics of social science research organisations was pronounced rudimentary (Crawford and Perry, 1976: 9). The proposition remains as worthy of testing now as then. We need institutional analysis, history and – in the case of the Council – more debate about purpose and process. During the Council's first decade it instigated and contributed to debate about the division of labour between knowledge bodies; it no longer takes that system-wide view. The missing history need not be bland. Across the postwar social science scene stride some big personalities, for example the late Claus Moser, statistician, civil servant, trustee, think tanker, panjandrum: a biography is lacking.

A barrier to tracing impact from research into policy and practice is 'lack of information on interactions between researchers and users' (ESRC, 2013a: 8). Once, the Council was urged to focus on social science utilisation, and upgrading the 'use capacity' of organisations (Cherns, 1972); it did not happen. On a key question – whether research support (through the Council) does indeed shape knowledge – we lack evidence. Colin Talbot did something unusual: he asked civil servants where they looked for knowledge. They value general expertise as much, or more, than they do specific research (Talbot and Talbot, 2014).

It's not just the Council. Other agencies potentially important in structuring knowledge are as unknown, among them the learned societies and the disciplinary clubs. They seem important as gatekeepers, undergirding peer review and the activities of both the Council and the higher education funding agencies, yet are notoriously under-financed, and habitually dependent on the donated time of a few active disciplinarians. They have become structurally weaker, anyway. 'Collegial bodies are (now) given less account than individual higher education institutions that no longer have "care" for the overall research eco system rather than their individual positioning within it' (BSA, 2014: 1). One of my themes

is how early synoptic or interdisciplinary ambitions were thwarted. 'Despite encouragement from the ESRC, work that analyses problems in a multidisciplinary way is relatively unusual', reports the former head of government social research (Duncan, 2015). The story is about how social science was tracked into tightly bounded disciplines; why the SSRC was powerless to intervene when entire disciplines – sociology, later economics – went astray ('astray' in terms of the original mission of the Council; the only other non-teleological sense of 'astray' is movement away from providing general understanding of social and economic conditions). Put that another way: peer review dominated disciplines but *social science* could muster no peers, no generic practitioners. Institutionally social science in the UK was and remains weak. National bodies such as the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh either came late to 'representation' of social science or offer that only fitfully.

THE INVISIBLE ESRC

'The ESRC is perceived as "quiet"' (ESRC, 2013b). An organisation dedicated to public enlightenment (we hope) is barely known to the public. Are citizens its 'customers'? Does it matter that the funding body goes unseen if the work it supports gets picked up? A science purist would say no: labelling does not matter. In the real world of budgets and lobbying for exiguous funds, it does.

Even in the pitted, hill-and-dale landscape of British public bodies, the Council is oddly elusive. In the early 1980s it gave academics, along with William Plowden, then Director General of the Royal Institute of Public Administration, a grant to examine the Joint Approach to Social Policy (JASP), a 1970s effort instigated by the Central Policy Review Staff to combat the fragmentation of Whitehall departments and local government. The initiative failed, only to be resurrected in various guises – cabinet committees and the like – over subsequent years. The story of JASP is, in part, about what the state knows. Yet the write-up doesn't mention the knowledge body that gave them the money, either as an actor or reference point (Challis et al., 1988). This account of an attempt to push rationality as an organising principle of government discussed the creation of the Department of Economic Affairs, the Fulton Report, the arrival of cost-benefit analysis, the commissions on local government, the reorganisation of the NHS (by Keith Joseph, the SSRC's nemesis), but not a word about the SSRC – even though one of its champions under the Wilson government of 1966–70, Shirley Williams, became chair of the 'strategic' group of ministers overseeing JASP in the Wilson government of 1974–6. This may be a reflection of a generic indifference to knowledge and expertise in Whitehall.

The CPRS was called 'the think tank' but was a nest of dilettantes and 'bright young things' rather than experts: their skills were those of consultants, marshalling what evidence there was and reaching recommendations (Bulmer, 1987: 17). Even so, the absence is striking, especially (as we see in Chapter 3) because the SSRC's leadership was anxious at the time to up its influence.

Another illustrative non-appearance by Macavity is in an analysis by the House of Commons Library (House of Commons Library, 2015) of Sure Start, a high-profile social intervention that survived Labour's exit from power in 2010, but has since been cut back. High hopes and political suspicion swirl around it, as an instrument to advance social mobility and improve the life chances of poor children. It touches on big social science themes to do with background and inter-generational continuity in disadvantage. The Library's summary relied heavily on Sir John Hills and colleagues at the LSE Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE, 2015). CASE has passed in and out of ESRC sponsorship. Why it did not become a flagship 'IFS for social policy' is unclear unless, as with IFS, academic jealousies have played a dispiriting role, together with hesitation on the part of the Council about long-term funding of centres and units – stemming from its uncertain sociology of social science knowledge production. Significantly, the ESRC did not sponsor CASE's audit of coalition social policy, which was paid for by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trust for London and the Nuffield Foundation.

This practical evaluation is social science in action. Hills is one of the country's most eminent students of poverty, housing and inequality. Several disciplinary lines weave through the genealogy of policies and political commitments in Sure Start. Ideas from the United States, previous social science research, ministerial instincts about early years interventions: they all play a part. What's hard, perhaps impossible, to sift are specific connections between discrete pieces of research, academic journals, analysis by governments and outcomes, including (we hope) better lives for children. Associations, yes; causation, no. Science but no precision. Instincts are as important as (rare and peripheral) randomised controlled trials. Distinguishing the Council's part is hard, perhaps impossible. This book will use the simile of a pool or lake, which is borrowed from Janet Lewis, former research director of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Over 50 years the Council has pumped kilolitres into it but has little idea – who has? – about how or when abstraction occurs, who bathes, and who avoids the water altogether. When we see an instance of paddling, we know little about what, cognitively speaking, is going on. In the University of Cambridge's submissions to the 2014 REF impact exercise (Impact Case Study REF 3b), ESRC research was cited and impact was registered by the researcher's



receipt of a letter from David Willetts (before he became science minister in the Cameron coalition). In it he attested to his interest in the research, saying: 'I am trying to make sense of the debate about the extent to which attitudes are shaped by the cohorts to which people belong or by stage in the life cycle'. The researcher was praised for her 'interesting and valuable' study. Willetts (writing his own book about intergenerational transfers and justice) would have been remiss not to find the research interesting because he too is swimming or paddling and the waves of knowledge are breaking; but is this 'engagement' or 'impact', let alone 'transfer'?

The background role played by the Council is of a piece with the pluri-form and often unpredictable course that knowledge for government takes. Of course statecraft is immersed in 'evidence' – meaning analysis, modelling, the deployment of information and data. But government welcomes expertise and research findings only in doses, and fitfully at that. The introduction to George Osborne's 2015 spending review (HM Treasury, 2015) is a prime exhibit. It makes no explicit mention of evidence or data, let alone research or science, social or otherwise. The victorious Tory party knows what it wants; it has a Commons majority; who is going to reprimand it for non-sequiturs or unsubstantiated assertion? The document does cite data collected by government departments, the ONS, Office of Budget Responsibility and think tanks (the King's Fund). Also 'expertise' is to be tapped, it says, from the 'What Works' centres, established with the support of the ESRC (see Chapter 2).

These centres exemplify the problem described above. They cross and re-cross between science (what academics do for its own sake), evaluation and practical analysis. The ESRC tries to throw a blanket over the whole, saying it only supports 'excellence'. What that means in practice is knowledge generated and attested within academic circuits, peer review by the established disciplines.

AUTISTIC KNOWLEDGE

Peer-reviewed, 'disciplined', unchallengeable from outside the college: these became hallmarks of the knowledge supported by the Council. Its history revolves around the over-production of autistic knowledge. The first chair of the SSRC, Michael Young, believed that social science research would produce knowledge that decision makers would absorb and – the Enlightenment nostrum – in knowing more, they would make better decisions. Within a few years of its foundation the Council had moved away from anything as straightforward. It moved to support research without any purchase on what happened to it, becoming an



intermediary between government and what came to be called the community of social scientists. Except the professors weren't solidaristic: they tended to put discipline before the common weal. After a decade the former secretary to the Heyworth Committee found the social science disciplines 'lead separate lives' (Cherns, 1979: 26). They come together only under the umbrella of the SSRC, in a few multidisciplinary institutes but otherwise as competitors inside 'social science' faculties. 'Many economists are not sure whether they are social scientists or not, and more psychologists are included to think they are "life" scientists or possibly "human" scientists' (Cherns, 1979: 85).

Their principal interest lay in securing support for work that would bring disciplinary kudos (later, this came with a pound sign attached, as research assessment intensified), with the minimum of conditionality; they rejected themes and priorities (what the Council described as 'strategic' research) as dirigisme and illegitimate interference in the life of mind. This ran the risk of hypocrisy, as Albert Cherns pointed out (using the male pronoun). 'The social scientist cannot simultaneously claim support on the grounds of the usefulness of his work to the aims of government and arrogate to himself the choice of what work he will do' (Cherns, 1972: xix). But this was a battle they largely won, though they have rarely acknowledged the victory. The consequence has been that knowledge belonged to them.

The story of the Council wraps into the history of social science's impact; however percussive that noun, the tale cannot be reduced to disciplinary growth and the expansion of private knowledge and the ever greater array of titles of learned journals. Nor whether, over the years, the Council did manage to pull together the fissiparous tribes into a community. (The half-century verdict is doubtful.) At some point the 'social knowledge' produced under the aegis of the Council must touch on public, politicians and profit-makers and be judged in use. Among public concerns over the past 40 years, inflation falls dramatically as a worry into the early 1980s; unemployment rises then falls to a marginal anxiety. Trade unions disappear. The NHS rises during the later 1980s into the 1990s, along with schools. New worries appear – crime, migration and race, terrorism. Old worries – housing – fade. Should social science mirror these concerns in terms of the balance of investigation; did public spending through the Council reflect such public priorities? Should social science have educated opinion, on the basis of empirical study, data collection and consequentialist argument, including the opinion of policy makers who may be putting resources into issues – crime – that elicit public alarm but don't need spending, according to the 'evidence'? This short account is intermittently sceptical. That is partly because 'shaping' and influence logically require a degree of attention

to communication, dissemination and public awareness, of which the record shows only sporadic signs.

A collector of opinion data is Ipsos Mori, along with TNS BRMB, YouGov and others. They are social science companies. Their business is data, methodology and prediction. Once, the ESRC could showcase the views of Gallup's managing director, Gordon Heald; he regretted not finding an 'academic home' for his firm's cross-national and longitudinal study of values and attitudes (Heald, 1990). Now research is strictly bifurcated. Commercial companies are underlabourers, providing the field force for sample surveys; they are not invited to sit at the top table as knowledge generators.

IMPRESARIO?

The intellectual health and development of the social sciences should be the concern of a strategist or impresario; would the role ever have been open to the Council? There have been hints at this wider oversight. For example in 1975 the SSRC supported an inquiry into learned societies which were struggling. Here might have been an opportunity to fashion a transcending social science identity above that of individual disciplines. But it was only several years later that the Association of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences was formed, a sickly child. Its progeny, the Academy of Social Sciences, struggles to make headway against the academic tides. The ESRC has supported the Strategic Forum for the Social Sciences and initiatives to coordinate data resources. But the forum lacks people from business as well as clout (British Academy, 2008). Strategy is easier to invoke than to deliver. A senior civil servant – Richard Bartholomew, head of research at the Department for Education – said 'we bring these things together by working alongside the academic community and the research councils to identify the areas of future data we need to pursue commonly' (Science and Technology Committee, 2012: 24). But that 'working' is at best informal and intermittent. Since the creation of the SSRC, UK government – the point has applied pretty much in the same way to the devolved administrations since 2000 – got on with its own versions of social (science) research in parallel and often indifferent to what the Council was doing. The state has a substantial internal social and economic research function, lets a large volume of research contracts and seeks varieties of evidence, some from universities, some from think tanks and intermediate bodies of varying intellectual pedigree. The division of labour between the Council and this function is unclear. For example, the coalition's data white paper said government social researchers would routinely

'archive research data' – a proposal undiscussed with the ESRC that would, had it been implemented, have cut across several existing initiatives (Cabinet Office, 2012).

So any picture of state knowledge that started or finished with the ESRC would be seriously deficient – leading to such knowledge was one of the reasons for creating the SSRC. Another puzzle to be described, if not solved.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Maximum consensus gathers around the bland assertion that social science is worthwhile. Social science, that is, on a catholic definition as the study of people, their attitudes, culture, behaviour, market transactions, voting and so on. But favouring more human self-understanding gives no guide to how much (beyond a glib 'more') should be supported from public funds, nor does the general favourable proposition endorse this or that research application, journal article or finding. It may be (academics might say) that the Council's vocation was to advance social science knowledge, to which the only applicable evaluative criteria are immanent and internal to the club of disciplines. But even the club has difficulty with more and better/worse assessments.

Charles Lindblom uttered the base proposition. 'Most people believe that the answer (to making policies more effective) lies in bringing more information, thought, and analysis into the policy-making process' (Lindblom, 1980: 11). But social science knowledge is not immanent; it does not leap, like a salmon, from the racing waters of disciplinary debate into a pond where patient political and policy anglers sit with their rods. Knowledge for what is an old query: all answers are normative, i.e. to make things 'better'.

But what if, another analogy, knowledge is sequestered from birth in a dungeon and never sheds its light? The Council has paid for production but spent much less on communication and consumption (accepting those costive nouns don't capture what actually happens when people read, mark and fail to inwardly digest). The reason has to do with ownership. If knowledge belongs to the university or the discipline, it's they who should pay attention to the theory or practice of sharing and dissemination. But they don't. The doyenne of evidence-for-policy thinking, Carol Weiss, observed that what social scientists say – their theories, thinking, taxonomy – may shape the nature of the problems perceived by public and policymakers (cited in Wilson, 2002: 9). But a precondition for such enlightening influence is being there, being present in debate: it's communication; the other precondition is sympathy and sensitivity to public mood and policy makers' possibilities.

It would be possible to list all projects supported by the Council over the years and tie them to articles and books. But that, at best, would register only 'arrival' – the moment of academic publication. There are many more such moments. But if social science academics now publish in a greater number of journals than 50 years ago, is the resulting weight in and of itself valuable? 'Valuable' could be a functional (consequentialist) judgement along the lines: more knowledge has led to better decisions (assuming they can be independently measured). Or else 'valuable' is a normative statement, of a kind which, if made by a group less (allegedly) disinterested than academics, would be suspicious.

Still, some effort must be made to judge the 'enough' question. Enough resources, enough focus, enough impact? Did the Council concentrate 'enough' on public spending itself, or the components of GDP growth, or institutional reformation? The SSRC was born in a decade of public spending growth (by about 9 per cent of GDP over the 10 years from 1960), but also of worries about what later was called the supply side of the economy. In retrospect, modernisation efforts (the civil service, technical education) failed. Tax is an example of an arena of knowledge in deficit – it was acknowledged from the late 1960s that the tax authorities monopolised the field, crimping both policy making and analysis (Robinson and Sandford, 1983). That gap prompted Nils Taube, Dick Taverne and others to get the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) going. Charles Sandford for a time ran the Centre for Fiscal Studies at the University of Bath. Why did it lapse, when the volume of tax research is insufficient? The IFS now scoops the pool. Why no concerted attempt to irrigate the fields of policy, practice and public understanding of taxation? Such examples of disjuncture – loose ends of knowledge – are everywhere.

But knowledge doesn't 'grow' if – the purpose but also the curse of social science – new knowledge undermines what went before. During the half-century, women 'arrived', as teachers and researchers and as critics and reformers of models and ways of thinking. Most of the social science that went before – and much since – was gendered in ways that reduced its claims to be about 'the business of people' and made it more like 'the business of men'. How should we evaluate the changed contours of knowledge as consciousness grew and in growing subverted and diminished what went before? It's not a matter of science but values. Ways of trying to know the world are deficient if they leave women out or are not done by women.

It's not just gender. Surely a machine for producing knowledge about economy and society bears some responsibility for the direction taken by actors in economy and society. Did it support work that should have informed them; if

so, were they informed; did they behave as if they knew what the research and analysis said? Take the corporate sector. John Kay contrasts mission statements from a company such as ICI over our half-century:

The one said, 'Our aim, our objective, is the responsible application of chemistry and related sciences. And through achieving that aim, we will make money for our shareholders, the community, etc.' And with that in mind, they moved from one business to the other gradually over a period of years and were Britain's leading industrial company. They then decided to focus on creating shareholder value and within a decade had lost most of the shareholder value with which they started. (Kay, 2015)

Shareholder value is a practice and instrument for enrichment of an interest group, but it is also an idea promulgated and discussed in public arenas, among politicians and regulators as well as in boardrooms. If we say such an idea is too far away from the elaborations and work of economists and students of business organisations (supported by the Council), we are making a candid admission about the relevance of their work. If we say shareholder value was advanced on the back of work supported by the Council, that would ascribe unwelcome responsibility for what – many would argue – has been a malign, even dysfunctional development in modern British capitalism. And if we say shareholder value advanced despite work done by the Council, that sounds like a confession of impotence and marginality.

In fact, it's well nigh impossible to say anything. We simply don't know enough about the genealogy of prevalent socio-economic ideas and perceptions. Examples tend to be asserted rather than demonstrated – for example the alleged dependence of Google on social network theory developed (in the US mostly) two decades ago. There is, putatively, some relationship between the production of knowledge by social scientists over the years and its use. But quite what it is, we can't say.