

SOCIAL SCIENCE, SOCIAL RELEVANCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

By Professor Lily Kong, SMU President

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Making Social Science Matter: Social Science and Social Relevance

I have entitled my talk “Social science, social relevance and social responsibility”. It comes from a deeply held belief in making social science (and indeed, arts and humanities) matter, not just to ourselves as academics and intellectuals. I believe firmly in addressing issues that are of concern to the local, national and global communities that we are a part of, in ways that make a difference to these communities. While it remains of great importance that we address other academics and engage in debate with one another, this must be to ensure that we maintain rigor in argument and evidence base. But ultimately, I believe that our discourses must be meaningful to those we choose to study, whose lives and experiences we examine, and for whom our research should make some difference.

That difference need not be immediate nor utilitarian. It could indeed take time to percolate, and may touch the human spirit in affective, as opposed to functional ways. In any case, it should certainly not be based on shallow analysis but should come through deep insights and the cut and thrust of debate that characterizes the best of academia. Because I do not simply take an immediate view of relevancy, I do not advocate that all social science work is immediately applied work, and certainly not at the expense of theoretical work. However, I do not believe that there is ascent to robust theory without descent to case study. This was the expression that the late Paul Wheatley shared with me when I wrote to him in his Chicago base for comments on my dissertation proposal about 30 years ago. It means that the best work that can truly impact society has robust theoretical underpinnings developed through debate, while strong theoretical work draws from deep engagement with real world issues and is relevant to them.

In fact, in one sense, the public and social relevance of social science should be patently apparent. If we look at all that is happening around us, and what is reported and discussed in the media (traditional and new), the question of whether there is public value of the social sciences seems redundant. A well-meaning senior colleague from the STEM field once said that we should do what the scientists do, in successfully lobbying the newspapers to have a science column that covers the latest discoveries. The retort that I heard was priceless. We don't need a special column. The rest of the newspaper is about social science. But I can understand that the relevance of social science might be questioned, for if one were to pick up an academic social science publication, it is highly likely that one will be confronted by over-theorized ideas written in hyper-postmodern thickets of jargon. There are several problems here. For one, these works are simply unintelligible. Worse, we lose our ability to speak to the community within which we live and act, to the non-academic everyday individuals we observe, analyse and reflect on. We write for an academic in-group, speak the language of key academic gatekeepers and seek their consent, pressured by the need to publish or perish. For some, it breeds academic careerism rather than intellectual merit and social concern. We effectively deprioritise writing back to the community with which we interact and analyze.

Adam Gamoran, the president of the William T. Grant Foundation in the US, writes that “typically, researchers are insulated from the criticisms of pundits and politicians who question whether universities deserve the status and privileges they enjoy. University faculty operate within a system that rarely asks them to prove their value to a broader public. Rather, academics are rewarded for developing and testing theories, and publishing findings in books and journals in their fields. Their charge is to generate knowledge, and many do so prolifically. But unlike in engineering and medicine, where transferring new knowledge into workable technology is often regarded as the ultimate professional accomplishment, such ‘tech transfer’ is uncommon in the social sciences. Despite innovation in the content of research, research institutions in the social sciences have not been innovative when it comes to ensuring that the outside world uses research. Yet such innovation may be the key to social impact, and thus demonstrating the value of research to those who question its worth” (2018).

Making Social Science Matter: Rhetoric and Reality

Many of us will believe that we want and do make social science matter. The reality is, to quote two British social scientists, we prefer to “critique, or dismiss, from a detached and distant, if principled, position, rather than risking compromising [our] critical purity by ‘dining with the devil’ and collaborating with the central state (Dorling and Ward, 2003:955). A variety of reasons underpin this position.

Politics, policy and policing

The first is that many social scientists view such research as driven by the political and other dictates of government, research funding bodies, and corporations. It is thus viewed as likely to be compromised in scope and orientation from the very start. In other words, policy studies, for many, threaten the very independence of interest, thought and method that is the hallmark of academia (Martin, 2001:199).

A cultural studies scholar, Wang Jing (2003), argues that the mainstream cultural left in cultural studies makes an analytic distinction as follows: commitment to ‘politics’ entails commitment to critique and resistance; ‘policy,’ on the other hand, is linked to policing, hegemony, and the status quo. This is why mainstream cultural studies (whose staple fare is critiques of power) dismisses policy-oriented cultural research as an ideological betrayal (Wang, 2003).

To David Harvey (1984, cited in Johnston 1993:162-3), writing in the context of geography:

Notions of ‘applied’ and relevant geography pose questions of objectives and interests served. The selling of ourselves and the geography we make to the corporation is to participate directly in making their kind of geography, a human landscape riven with social inequality and seething geopolitical tensions. The selling of ourselves to government is a more ambiguous enterprise, lost in the swamp of some mythic ‘public interest’ in a world of chronic power imbalances and competing claims.

Intellectual snobbery

A second reason underpinning many social scientists’ preferred detachment is anchored in a conception of policy study as somehow intellectually inferior to the ‘higher’ pursuit of theorizing (Martin, 2001:198-199). Policy study is seen as simply “‘applied’, often atheoretical and merely descriptive” (Martin, 2001:199). More often than not, policy work is seen as ‘bad

science' or second-rate research, regarded as narrow technical concerns to be tackled within the confines of state(d) aims and objectives (Peck, 1999). Such practical knowledge is viewed as incompatible with abstract and scientific knowledge (Peck, 1999). Producing abstract scientific knowledge is in fact deemed respectable 'mental labour' while policy research is considered 'manual labour' (Peck, 1999). However, as already intimated earlier, serious policy study is extremely demanding intellectually. It requires not only a deep theoretical and empirical understanding of the problems which are the focus of policies being investigated, but also the development of appropriate methods and procedures for assessing these policies. Thus the relationship between theory and policy should be an interactive and recursive one (Martin, 2001:199).

Academic playgrounds

A third reason for what has been described as a retreat to "superficial academic radicalism" with a dearth of concrete practical proposals for political, social and economic reform (Rorty 1999, cited in Martin 2001) is that some social scientists have come to

simply treat theory and concepts as a sort of intellectual game which has become increasingly detached from real world problems and concerns ... Under the guise of liberation, empowerment and giving voice to those hitherto excluded, [this trend] simply reinforces the privileges of the intellectual elite to play an elaborate language game written by and for a tiny minority of participants (Hamnett 2001, cited in Martin 2001:196).

Critical social science thus becomes something practised more in seminar rooms and academic journals than on a wider stage. Yet, there is an urgent need to take empirical work more seriously, with greater attention directed to methodology and the quality of evidence, reversing the drift towards "thin empirics" (Martin, 2001:202).

Working and writing otherwise

To deliver research that makes a difference to those we study requires that we work and write differently.

First, we clearly need to be engaged with the public, private and people sectors, through their structures of policy and decision making and action, so that our work can inform theirs. It requires that we understand deeply how they work, see things from their perspective, and seek answers to questions that they grapple with daily, in order to make the lives of people better. While social science is most helpful to policy formulation in its conduct of evidence-based research, what social science might do more radically is to reformulate questions underlying policy formulation or point to questions that ought to be asked but are not asked, re-examining how social issues have been conceptualized and therefore how they may most effectively be addressed by government policy (Massey, 2000). Further, Pollard et al. (2000) encourage a broader conception of 'policy' and suggest that there are many shades of 'grey' policy work that should be valued. For example, the range should include work with companies, volunteer organisations and supranational bodies.

This may require that we think differently about the successful academic, and different models of academic life. We might want to embrace not just those who have only been deeply embedded in the academic enterprise, but also those who move from the world of practice into academia. We might want to enable short stints – perhaps even periodic ones – for those from both worlds in the other's domain.

Second, even if we do not seek to address policy questions and influence action through our research, I believe that, minimally, we should communicate the results of our research in accessible ways to those we have engaged in the course of our research, and where relevant, to others in the community. This means that we need to first recognize that our ultimate goal is not to engage in “a theoretical playground where its practitioners stimulate or entertain themselves and a handful of readers” (Hamnett, 2003:1). Here, I am reminded of the work in public history, which is a “history that is seen, heard, read, and interpreted by a popular audience. Public historians expand on the methods of academic history by emphasizing non-traditional evidence and presentation formats, reframing questions, and in the process creating a distinctive historical practice.... Public history is also history that belongs to the public. By emphasizing the public context of scholarship, public history trains historians to transform their research to reach audiences outside the academy” (<http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/history/publichistory/main.htm>). I contend that we should develop a public social science, informed by rigorous research and robust ideas.

Finally, we need to recognize fully that the impact of our research is also extended through our educational work, for the power of shaping minds through education can have multiplier effects in shaping our economy, society, culture and polity. Making a difference thus may not always involve policy work with governments alone. Indeed, it has been argued that engaging undergraduate students through ‘critical pedagogy’ (Castree, 1999, cited in Pollard et al. 2000) is just as important and may be seen as social impact, because these undergraduates are the population that will go on to run government departments and corporations. In this view, the educational mission deserves more attention and support for its potential future influence than it has perhaps currently been given.

Living a responsible life: social science and social responsibility

I turn next to the question of how, as social scientists, we are to live the responsible life. I focus on three points. The first pertains to our role as academic gatekeepers. The second relates to serving as gatekeepers against the misuse of social science. The third focuses on how we allow our research and data to be used, to the extent that we have control.

First, our role as responsible academic gatekeepers. This is most evident in our role as authors, reviewers and editors. In May 1996, a paper published in *Social Text* by New York University mathematical physicist Alan Sokal was later exposed as a bogus article. Sokal himself revealed the hoax. He had written a deliberately nonsensical paper as an exposé of cultural studies and social science in general. He followed up in 1997 with the book *Impostures Intellectuelles* (co-authored with physicist and philosopher of science Jean Bricmont), published in English a year later as *Fashionable Nonsense*. Their main critique was that some social scientists were using scientific and mathematical terms incorrectly but more seriously, were denying the value of truth through their relativism and anti-rationalism. Certainly, Sokal and others like him were criticised for their reductionist view of science (Holquist and Shulman, 1996:54). My intention here is not to weigh in on the “Science Wars”, but to remind ourselves of our responsibility as we conduct our research and publish our papers. At least part of the fallout of this incident was a recognition that such “fashionable nonsense” could pass muster with reviewers and editors whose roles as academic gatekeepers are pivotal to the reliability and responsibility of the academy in knowledge production and consumption. Hyper-postmodern thicket of jargon should not be mistaken for depth and sophistication of thought.

Second, academics can serve as gatekeepers against the “politicization and misuse of social sciences” (SSRC, 2018:2). I cite the example of how the SSRC in the US called out US government officials’ handling of census data collection. Writing in its report, the SSRC’s “To Secure Knowledge” Task Force expressed concern about “disregard for the basic norms of research” and the “future of social knowledge”, as “US government officials ... determined that the 2020 census will include an unreliable citizenship question, which will generate an inaccurate count of the nation’s population. The question has not been field tested and threatens to impoverish research and public policy decisions that require high quality census information.” (SSRC, 2018:1). The Task Force called for “reimagined collaboration among researchers, institutions, policy-makers, and the private sector – to improve the pursuit of social knowledge and its potential to contribute to the common good” (SSRC 2018:2).

Third, many of you will be familiar with the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica saga. In 2014, Aleksandr Kogan, a data scientist in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge, through his company Global Science Research, had created an app called “thisisyourdigitallife”. Users were paid to take a psychological test via the app, which reportedly also collected their data and that of their Facebook friends. The database accumulated data of about 50 million Facebook users. Kogan shared this with Cambridge Analytica, which then developed “psychographic” profiles of people, and delivered material to them online to influence their choices in elections, most notably the American presidential election, as well as the Brexit vote. Certainly, the issue is mired in controversy. Facebook has blamed Kogan for lying about how the data would be used and violating its policies on data transfer, insisting that its rules do not allow such a reuse of data. Kogan has argued that the terms and conditions of his own app were clear and explicit that the results would be used for more than just academic purposes. Without taking one or the other’s position, it remains that episode reminds us what our responsibilities are as social scientists and how we need to take moral and ethical decisions about our work and the use to which we allow them to be put (when these are within our control).

Conclusion

And so, I conclude with these thoughts. We must surely want to make social science matter, and we must want to do so responsibly.

The long-term future of social sciences turns largely on our ability to connect our research agenda to human needs (Harman, 2003). Academic disciplines are esteemed, supported and patronized largely to the degree they are perceived as providing a ‘return’ on invested societal resources. Disciplinary relevance and survival are tied to research agendas pursued – the greater the perceived ‘return’, the better for the long-term health of the discipline.

But beyond survival and a desired prominence for the social sciences, it is surely a “moral duty” (Martin, 2001:190) for social scientists to be socially relevant. And so I leave you with this question: Why do we seek to expand and deepen our understanding of society if this knowledge and understanding is not used ultimately to help improve the human condition?

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