



Word from the President

Toward a More Public Social Science

When lawsuits challenged affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan, social scientists contributed to several *amicus curiae* briefs and an active public debate. Social scientists have also figured prominently in American debates over marriage (including both how to support it and whether to ban some forms of it); over productivity growth, the implications of outsourcing, and other economic issues; and over how to reform a costly and inequitable health care system. Internationally, social scientists have contributed to debates over the environment; globalization; combining growth and equity in economic development; and how free from commercialization and government control the Internet can be.

Each of these is an important instance of “public” social science. And indeed a variety of efforts are underway both to call more attention to the public value of social science and to make sure social science is published in ways that reach broader publics. The American Sociological Association annual meeting this August will focus on “public sociology.” A “public anthropology” section has just formed in the American Anthropological Association. Related concerns were part of the “perestroika” agenda for reform of the American Political Science Association. Several associations have either founded or are considering new journals to bring scholarship to a broader public. These efforts are all important.

However, I want to suggest four crucial ingredients of a more public social science that are not always stressed in such discussions.

1. Engagement with public constituencies must move beyond a dissemination model. It is not enough to say that first scientists will do whatever “pure” research moves them and then, eventually, there will be a process of dissemination, application, and implementation. Writing more clearly is good, but not the whole answer. For one thing, we should be cautious about assuming that social scientists should always write directly for broad publics; this may be more the task of some than others, and raising the standards for how journalists draw on social science may be equally important. As the crises of libraries and university presses reminds us, we have also failed to ask enough questions about what publications deserve public

subsidies and which should proceed on market bases. In the process, we have made it hard for both ourselves and especially our nonspecialist readers to identify what is really worthwhile. We also need to bring non-scientific constituencies for scientific knowledge into the conversation earlier. Those who potentially use the results of social science in practical action, and those who mediate between scientists and broader publics, should be engaged as social science agendas are developed. Neither broader dissemination nor better “translation” of social science will be adequate without a range of relationships to other constituencies that build an interest in and readiness to use the products of research.

2. Public social science does not equal applied social science. More “applied” research may be helpful, but the opposition of applied to pure is itself part of the problem. It distracts attention from the fundamental issues of quality and originality and misguides as to how both usefulness and scientific advances are achieved. Sometimes work undertaken mainly out of intellectual curiosity or to solve a theoretical problem may prove practically useful. At least as often, research taking up a practical problem or public issue tests the adequacy of scientific knowledge, challenges commonplace generalizations, and pushes forward the creation of new, fundamental knowledge. Moreover, work engaging important public issues— democracy and the media, AIDS and other infectious diseases, immigration and ethnicity—is not necessarily short-term or limited to informing immediate policy decisions. While putting social science to work in “real time” practice is vital, it is also crucial to recognize that none of these issues will go away soon. We won’t learn how to deal with them better in coming decades if we don’t commit ourselves now to both long-term pursuit of deeper knowledge and also systematic efforts to assess and learn from the practical interventions made in the meantime.
3. Problem choice is fundamental. What scientists work on and how they formulate their questions shape the

likelihood that they will make significant public—or scientific—contributions. Of course there are and must be research projects driven by intellectual curiosity and by attempts to solve theoretical problems—and these may produce useful, even necessary knowledge for a range of public projects. But it is also true that many academic projects are driven by neither deep intellectual curiosity nor pressing public agendas, but simply by the internal arguments of academic subfields or theoretically aimless attempts at cumulative knowledge that mostly accumulate lines on CVs. To justify these by an ideology of pure science is disingenuous. To let these displace the attention of researchers from major public issues is to act with contempt towards the public that pays the bills. Making the sorts of social science we already produce more accessible is not sufficient; we have to produce better social science. This means more work addressing public issues—and being tested and pushed forward by how well we handle them—and high standards for the originality and importance of projects not tied directly to public issues.

4. A more public social science needs to ask serious questions about the idea of “public” itself. What is “the public?” How are its needs or wants or interests known? How are they formed, and can the processes by which they are formed be improved, made more democratic, more rational, or more creative? Are there in fact a multitude of publics? How do they relate to each other and what does this plurality mean for ideas of the public good? How is public decision-making saved from “tyranny of the majority?” When are markets the best way to achieve broad public access, and when are governmental or philanthropic alternatives most helpful? Can ideas of the public be reclaimed from trivialization by those who see all social issues in terms of an aggregation of private interests? What are the social conditions of a vital, effective public sphere and thus of an important role for social science in informing public culture, debate, and decision-making? Indeed, science itself must be public—findings published and debated, theories criticized. This is how it corrects and improves itself. And social science informs public debate, not only the making of policies behind closed doors. Good science raises the quality of debate, clarifying its factual bases and theoretical terms; it doesn’t just support one side or another.

Consider the recent debates over affirmative action, including the University of Michigan court case. The idea that diversity of participation in higher education could be understood as a public good was in sharp tension with questions about the allocation of access as a private good. For many, the entire argument was over appropriate criteria for fair distribution of

admission understood as a private, individually appropriated benefit. But others held that for the public good of the state or the country it was important to make higher education available on other than private bases. What “public” means in such a discussion, why it matters, and how public benefits might be demonstrated are all important social science questions. If we have trouble answering them, this has implications not only for affirmative action policies, but for the rationale for public universities themselves (and indeed, for treating “private” universities as providers of a public good worthy of tax exemptions). Why is high quality education a public good, why is it good for the public, and why because of this is it crucial to democracy?

This is not simply an abstract theoretical question. Public universities are suffering serious fiscal pressures, and sometimes responding in ways that fundamentally transform their social roles. Since they draw in varying degree on state budgets, it is important to ask what public interests they serve. Are they merely mechanisms for the (more or less fair) distribution of state subsidies to “deserving” students (who turn out to be mainly middle class)? Or are the subsidies also intended to support industry by virtue of research and training? Or do they have a more identifiably public mission?

The answer is fundamental to whether key social institutions that support the production of scientific knowledge—and the education of citizens to understand it—will remain vibrant. Whether those who make decisions about public expenditures will think public research universities worth the cost depends in part on how well we scientists build bridges to other constituencies and make sure that science engages problems of pressing public importance.

A more public social science depends not only on the institutions in which knowledge is produced, but those in which it potentially informs public opinion, debate, and decision-making. Democracy also depends on a vital public sphere, yet current transformations in the media—not just technology, but ownership and economic structure, content and orientation, career structure and professional practice—raise important questions. Advocates and activists tackle these questions, but with too little serious research informing their work and providing for learning from real-time engagements.

A new SSRC project takes up this challenge. Supported by the Ford Foundation, we are looking at the ways in which public communications media underpin democratic public life. A central part of our agenda is to provide a richer basis in theory and evidence for debates over the role of government regulation and facilitation of different media from broadcast to the Internet, over the implications of private ownership and public funding, and over how to ensure both wide public access and diversity and quality of contents. These issues are intensely contested by legal advocates, grassroots activists, and representatives of different interest groups. But academic attention is thin, and dispersed over a range of different fields both in the social science disciplines and in professional schools of communications, law, business, and public affairs. Different kinds of empirical knowledge and intellectual perspectives are needed to develop

an adequate account of what is publicly important about the media. And it is at once an intellectual and a practical question what it means for citizens to claim rights in regard to the media that are not simply private property rights.

As we develop this project, we will not only bring together academics from a variety of fields, but also build bridges among advocates, activists, practitioners and academics and between all of these and those making decisions in regulatory agencies, legislatures, and corporations. That is, we will seek ways to have the thinking of those developing theoretical and research agendas directly informed by the kinds of concerns driving practical action and arguments before courts and regulatory bodies. The point is not to determine the results in advance of scientific work, but to make sure there is a constituency for the results of scientific work.

An important public role of science is to generate theory and evidence that can command the serious attention of those who approach practical questions with different values or agendas. The “research” that informs too many public debates is tailor-made to fit the needs of one or another line of practical argument. This problem is exacerbated by the extent to which such research is produced on a contract basis by firms—like the so-called “Beltway Bandits” around Washington, DC—that do not have a commitment to advancing scientific

only other scientists—like the interdisciplinary committees for which the SSRC is famous—but broader constituencies. Depending on the nature of the project, these might include policymakers, journalists, advocates, activists, or others. Getting a broader constituency involved in thinking about scientific research agendas as they are developed is an important way to make sure the results of scientific research get into the hands of those who need them. And for each SSRC project, we are trying near the outset to identify the set of core constituents whom we want to see informed by the debates and findings, and trying to map a strategy for reaching them.

None of this means that the scientific research process should be short-circuited, that political or policy considerations should distort findings. Nor does it mean that social science isn’t advanced by many kinds of work—such as much of the history and theory close to my own heart—that doesn’t have immediate practical uses. It does mean that better relationships between scientists and broader constituencies are vital to making science more useful, and indeed, in many cases intellectually better. Indeed, it may even be the case that better shared discussion of research agendas will sometimes build the basis for more acceptance of unpopular findings.

The SSRC can’t work on all the public issues towards which social science has potentially important contributions to make.

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knowledge and to the necessity of open debate over findings and arguments this entails. These firms—whether organized on a for-profit or not-for-profit basis—have grown largely because there was a demand for them from policymakers and advocates. This demand was informed partly by a desire to escape the uncertainties that a true quest for knowledge entails—including the possibility that the results won’t support the position one has taken in advance. But it was also shaped by academic social scientists distancing themselves from public debates and practical issues in the name of pure science, orienting their communications almost entirely to each other, and failing to work at least partly on schedules that brought out the results of their work in time to address active issues.

Too often, we act as though making sure that knowledge is shared and even used can be left to afterthoughts—separate actions after the research of which publication is the most important. And publication, we imply, is simply a matter of the eternal record, the accumulation of truths on which policymakers may eventually draw. But publication is also a conversation, central to science not just as a record but as part of the process by which understanding is refined, errors corrected, and possible applications discerned. And the conversation needs to start before publication—and indeed often while research is still in the planning stage. It needs to include not

We focus on a few—chosen partly because they are especially important, but also because they have strategic potential to change the way in which social science research is organized and informs public affairs. How is international migration organized, and how is it changing social life, social solidarities, culture and politics? How can growth and equity be effectively combined in economic development, and how can attention to the political, social, and cultural concomitants of economic change be integrated into development agendas? How does globalization both transform and work through regions and nations, how are these reconfigured, and when do they resist? How can public health be advanced, especially when socially organized capacities to deliver prevention, care, and treatment lag far behind new developments in biomedical science and in cases like AIDS where epidemics may bring social transformations?

Of course social scientists have long believed that the public ought to pay more attention to their work. The issue now is not simply to promote ourselves better, but to ask better social science questions about what encourages scientific innovation, what makes knowledge useful, and how to pursue both these agendas, with attention to both immediate needs and long term capacities. ■

CRAIG CALHOUN