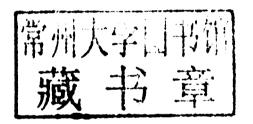
# the public value of the social sciences

John D. Brewer

# The Public Value of the Social Sciences An Interpretative Essay

John D. Brewer



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# The Public Value of the Social Sciences

### Comments on this book

This is a very important work. While many have attempted to champion favoured definitions of social science, very few have done so with the level of historical circumspection and critical understanding that is on display in this book. Very few, moreover, have ventured to provide such a wide-ranging survey and informed analysis of the current condition of social science in public life and how it might be fashioned to meet the demands of our day. There is much food for thought and much ground is cleared for further debate. I particularly welcome and value the emphasis that is placed upon the importance of recovering a tradition of social inquiry that serves as a means to nurture moral sentiment and human-social understanding; and all the more so insofar as this is also advanced as a vital component of the attempt to better understand and ameliorate the many urgent social problems we face. Here, the argument that social science should be normatively geared is also set into practice in the style of writing and argumentation. The argument in the book is designed to involve the reader in a series of critical reflections on their teaching and research practice; and further, the manner of their moral and political engagement with social problems in public life.

Iain Wilkinson, sociologist, University of Kent

It is a pleasure reading [this] manuscript, which I thoroughly enjoyed. It is a bracing read, provocative as intended and both inviting and welcoming engagement at many different levels. I thought it was magnificent in presenting such a compelling argument in what is otherwise a thoroughly muddied field. The text is provocative and I was provoked as you intended. However, I see no reason to soften or qualify your arguments. On the contrary, they should retain the vigour with which they are currently expressed. This is a really good read that carried me along. The text was both inspirational and liberating, and offers new ways to think about and approaches to issues that are critical.

Hastings Donnan, social anthropologist, Queen's University of Belfast

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I particularly enjoyed the critical dissection of the UK impact agenda and the survey of the health of the social sciences. It's a pity that in the former regard it hasn't appeared earlier in the current REF cycle. It is a spirited defence/mission statement for public value social science – and I was to some extent reminded of Bernard Crick's In Defence of Politics, which was by no means as defensive as the title implies – he ends (in the mid-1960s) with a rallying cry, as do you. The book certainly made me think – a lot. I found myself saying 'hear hear'. It also irritated me – but then again, that's a measure of its success in getting under my skin.

Rick Wilford, political scientist, Queen's University of Belfast

I think this is a really big issue. Chapter 3 almost had me leaping up and cheering. The bit about the loss of manners was particularly pointed. It is wonderful. You are really on the money. I couldn't agree more.

David Livingstone, human geographer, Queen's University of Belfast

I agree especially [with] the importance of increasing the appreciation of the public value of social science and the need for a more open intellectual approach to understanding the challenges that will emerge in this century (your 'wicked questions'). Your concern about the impact of 'impact' comes across vividly in the passionate way you have written.

John Beath, economist, St Andrew's University

I very much enjoyed reading your book. I have to nail my colours to the mast as someone who has never regarded law as a social science strictly speaking. I am not sure that the otherness of law comes through strongly enough here. When I read what you say about what has happened in universities during our careers and what is on the near horizon, I find myself in total agreement with your analysis. It has been a fascinating read.

Norma Dawson, private law, Queen's University of Belfast

Could I thank you for giving me the opportunity to look over your essay? I can say with complete honesty I found it both fascinating and at the same time profoundly depressing, in many ways confirming all my worst fears as to the perilous state in which the social sciences now find themselves. While I think your diagnosis of the problem facing the social science(s) is elegant and

I fully endorse your analysis and interpretation, where we differ is that I can see no happy ending. The quasi-marketization of UK higher education has spawned an HE culture and a generation of social scientists, including social psychologists, that would have no capacity or appetite to embrace the new world of public social science that you envisage. Their world is myopic, short term and risk-averse, driven by the next audit, and sadly no opportunity is thereby afforded to lift heads up out of the gutter to sniff any prospect of change, never mind grand revolution. I sincerely wish that I could share your optimism that a phoenix will rise from these ashes, but unless you can conjure up a Harry Potter pretty soon, I think it more likely all you will see is a continuation of the production line of expert procedural technicians, trying their best to do what they think they've been told to do.

John Kremer, social psychologist, Queen's University of Belfast

For my granddaughter, Matilda Somerville Brewer, born 17 August 2011.

### About the Author

John D. Brewer takes up a position as Professor of Post Conflict Studies in the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice at Queen's University Belfast, from Spring 2013. Prior to this he was Sixth Century Professor at the University of Aberdeen. He has held visiting appointments at Yale University (1989), St John's College Oxford (1992), Corpus Christi College Cambridge (2002) and the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University (2003). He has been a Leverhulme Research Fellow (2007-08). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (1998), an Academician in the Academy of Social Sciences (2003), a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (2004), then only the third sociologist to be elected in the Academy's history, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2008). He is one of only a handful of people worldwide who are members of the Royal Irish Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In 2012, he was awarded an Honorary Degree from the University of Brunel for services to social science. He has been President of the British Sociological Association (2009–12), a member of the Governing Council of the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Science (2008–12) and served on ESRC boards and on the national committees of the BSA and the Royal Irish Academy. In 2012, he was appointed by the Irish government to the Council of the new Irish Research Council, which integrates humanities, social science, engineering and the natural sciences, and to the Council of the Academy of Social Sciences.

He is author or co-author of 17 books, most recently *Ex-Combatants*, *Religion and Peace in Northern Ireland: The Role of Religion in Transitional Justice* (Palgrave 2013), *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach* (Polity Press, 2010). His latest research is on the sociology of peace processes, and he is Principal Investigator on a £1.26 million grant from the Leverhulme Trust for a 5-year study of compromise among victims of communal conflict, focusing on several case studies, including Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka. He has earned over £6.4 million in grants. He publishes in

the following areas: peace processes and post-violence adjustments, religion and peacebuilding, religion and conflict, qualitative research methodology, especially ethnography, Adam Ferguson and the Scottish Enlightenment, crime and policing and interpretative sociological theory.

As examples of public engagement, he regularly teaches peace and reconciliation workshops in Sri Lanka and for Mediation Network in Northern Ireland, and was active in the Northern Irish peace process as facilitator for the Faith in a Brighter Future Group of leading ecumenical churchmen and women in their dialogue with governments and paramilitary groups. He has also been involved as a policy advisor on policing reform in South Africa and Northern Ireland and is a member of the United Nations' Roster of Global Experts for his expertise on peace processes and religious peacebuilding. He regularly speaks to civil society and grassroots groups, including in 2011, Journey Towards Healing (Belfast) and the Gulen Institute's Dialog of Civilizations (Houston, Texas).

John Brewer is in his fifth decade as a self-consciously committed sociologist, having started as an 'A'-level student in sociology in 1968. He has always been persuaded by the views of Charles Wright Mills on the sociological imagination, in which the discipline tries to make a difference to the lives of ordinary men and women. Mills originally referred to this approach as characterizing 'social studies' generally, which was to form the original title of his book, and it is used here as the motif for the social sciences as a whole.

# Preface and Acknowledgements

The economist Joan Robinson once said that when you cannot find an answer there is something wrong with the question. I have taken this as sound advice and deliberately framed my chapter titles - as well as most of their subsections - as questions purposely to show there are answers, including to the most profound of these about the public value of social science. And what is my answer? There are two dimensions to the public value of social science: it not only generates information about society, it is a medium for society's reproduction. Put another way, it is the way in which society finds out about itself and in so doing generates the idea of society itself. The social sciences have public value, therefore, because they nurture a moral sentiment in which we produce and reproduce the social nature of society itself, enabling us to develop a sympathetic imagination towards each other as social beings and to recognize we have a shared responsibility for the future of humankind through understanding, explaining, analysing and ameliorating the fundamental social problems stored up for us. Social science, thus, becomes a public good for its own sake for cultivating this moral sentiment and sympathetic imagination through its subject matter, teaching, research and civic engagements. There is no incompatibility between the status of social science as science and its public value as a moral sentiment in disclosing through science that society is a social entity premised upon our nature as social beings.

The case for the public value for social science is not being heard in the public sphere. This has to do in part with the arts and humanities background of higher education journalists and government politicians, and the public attention given to vociferous humanities scholars in claiming as part of their defence of the principle of public universities that the humanities are the only civilizing tendencies left in higher education (Martha Nussbaum), or are more central to what the idea of a university means (Stefan Collini), but social scientists have also failed to articulate their case. The latter is as much

due to hostility towards the rhetoric of value as diffidence. I suffer from neither.

I am aware, however, that many people could have written this defence of the social sciences and restated their public value for the twenty-first century, most of them better than me, and I am conscious that the topics I touch on superficially here are better known to many others. I fear my inadequacy may be further reinforced among professional social scientists because I have deliberately written this book in a popular style and with a minimum of citations and discussion of actual social science research in order to make it accessible to a wide audience.

However, to avoid any suggestion that I am treating as shallow topics that have been subject to enormous debate by academics, I resort to the extensive use of footnotes and the occasional boxed vignette to capture some of this intensity (which can be ignored by those without interest in the arcane debate). It is necessary to labour this point a moment. The footnotes and vignettes serve a special purpose. I consider them very important to my argument, for they mostly highlight significant debates among professional social scientists, offer relevant illustrations of my argument or reinforce my point with examples. They have not been included in the text, however, because I do not wish to disrupt the narrative or overburden the general reader. I have left readers the choice of taking time out to pursue in further depth an issue in a way on the printed page that can only be achieved my means of footnotes and vignettes. In this manner, I have tried to balance the different needs of general readers and those of my colleagues.

I am grateful to Emily Drewe from Bloomsbury Academic for the invitation to take this overview and to Caroline Wintersgill, who replaced Emily as my editor, for looking after the project. I suspect I was commissioned because I occupied the post of President of the British Sociological Association (BSA) between 2009 and 2012, and had set my tenure to encourage a constructive engagement with the idea of impact and to demonstrate by a range of public events and initiatives the public relevance of sociology. I am grateful to the Association for the honour and privilege to act as President and to the number of colleagues and friends in the BSA who supported me, including earlier when I was Chair of the National Executive Committee (2004–06), especially

Judith Mudd, Gayle Letherby, Rob Mears, John Scott, Tim Strangleman, Susan Halford, David Inglis, Tom Hall, Geoff Payne, Iain Wilkinson, Linda McKie and the late Liam Murphy and Ray Pahl.

I am aware that the invitation also lay in part in the sort of work I have done as a sociologist throughout my career - publicly engaged, empirically oriented yet attuned to conceptual clarification, and popularly written; and that a background in research on topics like social division, political change, policing and police reform, crime, sectarianism, religion and peace and reconciliation was sufficiently cross disciplinary to enable me to write as a social scientist, as well as one experienced in doing socially relevant research. I, thus, owe a lot to the friends and colleagues I have talked with down the years, sharing many helpful discussions and receiving much good advice, such as David Livingstone, Bernie Hayes, Francis Teeney, Steve Bruce, Richard Breen, Chris Jenks, Duncan Rice, David Inglis, Liz Stanley, Myra Hird, David McCrone, Jack Spence, the late Fatima Meer, Peter Derman, Greg Kelly, Hastings Donnan, John Spencer, Sally Shortall, Rick Wilford, John Kremer and Shirley Lal Wijesinghe. They represent a multidisciplinary bunch, covering all the major social sciences, as well as demonstrating my affection for the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Aberdeen, places of work I am proud to be associated with.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues on the Leverhulme Trust-funded 'Compromise after Conflict' project (http://www.abdn.ac.uk/compromise-conflict), with whom I work on a daily basis, for the congeniality of my working life: Bernie Hayes, Francis Teeney, Katrin Dudgeon, Natascha Mueller-Hirth, Corinne Caumartin, Shirley Lal Wijesinghe, Rosemary McGarry and Jennifer McNern, including the linked PhDs – Dave Magee, Laura Fowler Graham, Sandra Rios, Clare Magill, Rachel Anderson, Aimee Smith and Duncan Scott – whose enthusiasm and drive inspires me about the future of the social sciences.

I am very grateful for a number of friends and colleagues across the social sciences that have read this volume in draft form and I apologize where I have not taken their sound advice: John Beath (economics), Dave Byrne (social policy), Norma Dawson (law), Hastings Donnan (social anthropology), John Kremer (social psychology), David Livingstone (human geography), Rick Wilford (politics) and Iain Wilkinson (sociology).

Finally, I want to express my love and gratitude to my family, Caitríona, Fiachra, Bronwen, Gwyn, Lori and, of course, Matilda; and also to my brother Colin. There is something in this volume of all these mentioned, although I am entirely responsible for what this is. But thank you everyone.

Kings College, Aberdeen 13 July 2012

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### Introduction

### Why write this book?

This book is about the public value of the social sciences in the twenty-first century. I anticipate a groan from some readers already who will not be immediately convinced of the point of discussing public value. The adjective 'public', after all, is overused. It is stuck before so many nouns that it is almost tiresome. Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association in 2004 (printed as Burawoy 2005) did not invent public sociology but he certainly gave us the term, and in the process made the adjective part of the zeitgeist. Most social science disciplines now come in a 'public' version. Web blogs abound devoted to the idea of the public – and, of course, creating publics in the very process. We are urged to differentiate 'publics', and to recognize that not all will be progressive (Calhoun 2007), to reinvent the idea of the public university (Holmwood 2011a), to become public spirited, to engage with, and be responsive to, the public and so on. The Open University's Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance in the United Kingdom (UK) has a research project called 'creating publics', with a lecture series and a web blog, designed to interrogate what public engagement means and how it might be enhanced (see http://www8.open.ac.uk/ccig/programmes/publics). There are countless other examples that I could mention: there are nearly six trillion references to 'public' on Google.

Its popularity resonates with the return of another closely related adjective, 'civil'. The 'public sphere' and 'civil society' are often run together as terms, and there are good reasons for this. 'Civil society' (see Edwards 2004) and 'the civil sphere' (see Alexander 2006) are arenas where we encounter publics, do the public engagement, garner and display our public spiritedness and mediate between governments and civil society. Edwards (2004: vi) asked at the turn

of the new millennium if civil society was the 'big idea' whose time had come. Not only does this seriously overlook the antiquity of the term, but it is also, I suggest, the adjective 'public' that is the mantra of late modern society. This is because it is part of its own subject matter, with the term 'public' successfully penetrating people's contemporary consciousness and discourse, and thus also that of social science.

Regardless of any cynicism provoked by the adjective, it is necessary to understand why 'public' has become popular as a term for our time. It is code for a series of normative questions that have emerged in late modernity about the nature of power. These questions are raised locally, nationally and globally by governments, citizens, civil society groups and social scientists, as power competes and fragments across its various sources as a result of what Foucault and others call the domestication or dispersal of power. Use of the adjective 'public' not only implies fundamental questions about accountability, but also poses additional queries about to whom should we as social scientists primarily feel accountable. It also moderates questions about accountability with others about responsibility, shifting focus away from our answerability towards our responsibility, by asking to whom should social scientists primarily feel obligated. It not only defines sets of issues in which we as social scientists should be interested, but asks whose perspectives on these issues we should consider the most important. If not anymore a question of which side social science is on, as Howard Becker (1967) put it in the heady days of the 1960s, since in late modernity there are no stark zero-sum answers, the adjective 'public' nonetheless conjures up deeply normative questions about the purpose and point of social science. My use of the term 'public value' is, therefore, meaningful because I intend to address these normative purposes and restate for the twenty-first century the public value of social science, showing how, in Orlie's (1997) evocative phrase, we can in our practice as social scientists live ethically and act politically.

'Value', however, is another term dismissed by cynics. I was once asked about the value of discussing value. I thought it a daft question, but it made me realize that the obvious answer could not be taken for granted. While I will be distinguishing types of value – for just as there are different publics, so there are different notions of value – it is first important to highlight, as it were, the value of public value.