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What is the Scale and Standing of British Social Science?

Introduction

My purpose in this chapter is very limited but also very ambitious. First, I want to give a sense of the scale of the social sciences in Britain in order to measure them against the country's provision for the sciences and humanities as well as the infrastructure for social science in other countries. This is not a modest undertaking. A lot of this information is surprisingly difficult to ascertain. Secondly, I will argue that British social science is world-class in its quality. This is not a modest claim. They are not equally good, nor everywhere good, but for a very small nation with relatively few practitioners, British social science punches well above its weight and, in terms of expenditure per head, exceeds the United States in quality. This requires stating the *social science* grounds on which I profess this claim.¹

Consideration of the scale and standing of British social science gives a necessary background to assessing their public impact. I conclude the chapter by noting the contested terrain over the meaning of impact. This is a precursor to Chapter 3 which uses a discussion of impact, the audit culture and the potential degradation of social science in Britain to launch my argument that this present conjuncture is an opportunity for the promotion of social science.

¹ As we shall see shortly, one of the ironies of the current conjuncture facing British universities is that the imposition by the state of an audit culture in universities, and the introduction of several and varied performance indicators intended to regulate them, is a double-edged sword, for it allows the social sciences in Britain to show, by the state's own performance measures, that they are world class. It sits uneasily with many critics of the audit culture, however, that these performance measures should be used to argue for the quality of the social sciences in Britain, since it legitimates them; the sword is perhaps triple-edged. I do not subscribe to this view. It is wryly humorous to me to see the government hoisted on its own petard. I do, however, stress the pernicious side to this audit culture in the next chapter.

What is the scale of the social sciences in Britain?

Britain lags behind comparators in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), dropping in 2010 to 15th place in the proportion of people going to university. At 1.2 per cent of Britain's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010, it spends less on higher education than the average of OECD members at 1.5 per cent, and much less than Australia, Japan and the United States. The United States, for example, spends 2.7 per cent of GDP on its universities. Public investment in higher education in the United Kingdom is even less, at 0.6 per cent, one of the lowest in the OECD (see Oswald 2011). Expenditure on total research and development, something larger than on universities, was 1.76 per cent of GDP in the United Kingdom in 2005, comparing unfavourably with the United States at 2.62 per cent, Germany 2.48 per cent, 3.32 per cent in Japan and Israel at 4.49 per cent. The United Kingdom did much better than the BRIC countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China, areas of the world rapidly expanding in population and industrial prowess, but in 2010 came 15th in a list of 58 countries (see UNESCO 2010: 370–1), with most European nations higher than Britain.²

With respect to funding specifically for the social sciences, as the 'third culture' (Kagan 2009) in British intellectual life, historical funding traditions benefitted the longer-established cultures, but the scale and critical mass of social science in Britain is overturning these historic patterns. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) produces annual figures that mark this shift (see <http://www.hesa.ac.uk>).³ For 2009–10, which provide the most up to date statistics available, 'total expenditure' (which includes all staff costs, operating costs and depreciation) across broad subject categories, showed that Administration, Business and Social Studies, the nearest approximation to social science,⁴ got 21.9 per cent of the budget on higher education, less than Medicine, Dentistry and Health at 24.5 per cent, which is the highest, but exceeding the 14.1 per cent for Biology, Mathematics and Physical Sciences,

² Published in 2010, UNESCO's world report on social science (UNESCO 2010), sometimes utilizes old data for the United Kingdom, but this is the only comparative data available. It is always important, therefore, to specify the date of the British data.

³ Consulted 27–31 October 2011.

⁴ This covers catering and hospitality management, business and management studies, geography, media studies and 'social studies', the latter of which is an amalgam of economics, politics, sociology, social policy, social work, anthropology, human and cultural geography and 'other social studies'.

13 per cent for Engineering and Technology and 8.2 per cent for Humanities, Languages and Archaeology. Education, many parts of which are appropriately named social science, had an additional 8.1 per cent.

In terms of academic staff numbers across the whole higher education sector, Administration, Business and Social Studies has 18.2 per cent of academic staff (full and part time), 37.3 per cent of the full-time staff being female, which is higher than the sector as a whole and an increase from 31 per cent in 2002 (Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 64). In terms of all higher education staff (which includes academic-related staff), the social science category is the second largest, behind Medicine, Dentistry and Health, and more than double that in Humanities, Languages and Archaeology. If we take HESA's broad category of Administration, Business and Social Studies as a rough approximation of social science (which, of course, excludes law and social psychology), in 2009–10, there were 44,160 social scientists employed in British HEIs.⁵ However, with the category boundaries being so opaque, these sorts of calculation can only be approximations. Based on submissions to the 2001 research assessment exercise (RAE) returns, for example, the Commission on the Social Sciences in 2003 estimated the figure as 25,000 (2003: 123), which HESA figures suggest is an underenumeration.

A report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2002) into changes in staff levels between 1995 and 2000 noted an average 6.5 per cent increase in staff levels across the sector as a whole, but 'social, political and economic studies' nearly doubled at 10.9 per cent, law increased by 12.1 per cent and business and administrative studies 13 per cent. It noted the difficulties in staff retention for law and economics, where opportunities outside HE were more lucrative than for other social sciences, and that economics in particular appointed mostly non-British staff, although this is explained as much by better quantitative training overseas than alternative employment opportunities for British-trained staff (also see Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 61–5); the deficiencies in quantitative training in economics have largely been

⁵ Comparing staff numbers cross-nationally is impossible because countries which include education, business and management and law within the definition of social science will have large numbers, and crude headcounts are further distorted by different employment practices whenever large numbers of casual and part-time staff are employed. The comparative statistics available in the *World Social Science Report 2010* (UNESCO 2010: 372–7) for 'researcher' head counts and full-time equivalents in 'higher education' exclude the United Kingdom and run together social science and humanities staff and thus offer no reliable comparison.

resolved since then, through selective postgraduate studentships and improved training by the ESRC.

Student numbers also give a measure of the scale of social science in Britain. Not only do the social sciences employ a lot of staff, but they also teach a high number of students. In 2009–10, the number of all students (full- and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate) in science was just over one million, those in social studies 213,755, law 94,375, business and administration 353,910, historical and philosophical studies 96,295, languages 138,090 and education 226,385. Total enrolment statistics like this reflect also in the number of new entrants in the social sciences, the number of social science degrees awarded and other surrogates for social science demand, the repetition of which would be tedious. It is relevant, however, to give a glimpse of demand across the separate subjects that comprise HESA's 'social studies' category, along with other social sciences. This is reflected in Table 2.1, which covers all students, for all years, full- and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate for 2009–10.

There has clearly been phenomenal growth in demand for some social sciences and steadier growth for others, but growth there has been for them all. This level of expansion in demand over the last decade is comparable across other HESA subject categories, and higher than some. That for 'social studies' as a whole was 59.5 per cent, comparing favourably with 55.7 per cent for business and administration, 52.9 per cent for languages, 52.6 per cent for medicine, dentistry and health, 30.9 per cent for the physical sciences and 26.8 per cent

Table 2.1 Student numbers in social science 2009–10

Subject	Total	% increase since 1990–2000
Economics	34,895	45.8
Politics	35,850	112.1
Sociology	34,755	49.4
Social Policy	16,215	110.0
Social Work	62,700	127.5
Anthropology	4,835	24.6
Human Geography	11,076	28.6
Other social studies	12,830	163.9
Psychology	82,510	747.1
Business and Administration	353,910	55.7
Law	94,375	63.1

Source: Worked from figures provided by Higher Education Statistics Agency at <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/706/>.

for engineering and technology. Historical and philosophical studies (which in 1999–2000 was called ‘humanities’, although the two are not entirely equivalent), witnessed growth in demand slightly higher at 60.2 per cent.

This scale needs, however, to be set in an international context. The International Social Science Council’s latest figures for student numbers in ‘social science, business and law’ cover 2006 and are, thus, quite old, but they do give a measure of the proportion this subject area comprises of the total student enrolments for various countries at that time. The United Kingdom’s was 27 per cent, equal to the United States, but the lowest in the whole of North America and Western Europe, save Ireland, Canada, Sweden and Finland (UNESCO 2010: 378–80). Not surprisingly given their recent social and political changes, countries in Central and Eastern Europe had a very large proportion of students studying in social science, business and law, as did Latin American and BRIC countries and South Africa, mostly exceeding that in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada by substantial proportions. This illustrates how ‘society’ as a subject matter offers a significant stimulus to social science, and those societies undergoing economic development and democratic transition are often among the keenest to ensure that they have the infrastructure in social science teaching to nurture this interest. Gross numbers studying social science are often lower in developing countries, of course, because of the limited size of total enrolments and the lag in building the infrastructure for higher education teaching. It is for this reason that Elizabeth King, from the Human Development Network at the World Bank, considers poor quality and inadequate higher education provision one of the developing world’s biggest bottlenecks.⁶

Social science teaching is also vigorous and enthusiastic in the school sector in Britain. In addition to courses in the main social science disciplines, citizenship is taught at Key Stage 4 (the two years of GCSE study) and this contains a strong social science component, as does Modern Studies in Scotland. The Commission on the Social Sciences (2003: 5) estimated at any one time there were 4.5 million 11–19-year-olds studying social science subjects in schools. Nearly half a million GCSE papers are sat annually with a substantial social science focus and 163,000 at ‘A’ level. Interestingly, they calculated that a substantially higher proportion of students with social science GCSEs go on

⁶ Quoted in the *Times Higher Education*, 10 November 2011, p. 17.

to take social science at university than is the case for history, mathematics and geography (2003: 79), and they noted that the number of school children exposed to social science teaching over the 20 years up to 2003 was 15 million (2003: 79); it must now exceed 20 million. All this is for subjects that are not compulsory. Add to this the two million social science graduates from HEIs over the last 30 years (estimated by the Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 108) and social science underpins a great deal of the public education people have received in Britain.

What is the standing of British social science?

If the scale of British social science places it ambiguously in relation to its international comparators, in terms of quality it is unambiguously among the best in the world.⁷ There are good reasons in British society that make it so. As the scientific study of society, social science gets its intellectual stimulus from its social location. Social science is different from natural science and the humanities therefore in being shaped – but not overdetermined – in its research and teaching agenda by the society in which it takes place. I am not implying there is a ‘British national social science’, although some have claimed thus (see Giddens 1996) – this is a more reasonable assertion for some social sciences than others, notably the British tradition of social anthropology (on which see Macdonald 2001)⁸ – or that there were no outside influences on British practitioners. The professionalization of the separate social sciences in the 1950s and the 1960s in particular led to heavy inputs from US-based social scientists and theorists, and the mobile nature of early career appointments witnessed many of the great names from later generations study on fellowships in the United States to establish themselves; as many North Americans did likewise this side of the Atlantic. And the influence of European social theory on social science in Britain is profound today. Contemporary patterns of migration see many young talented social scientists leave peripheral regions to move to the

⁷ This explains why Britain is so attractive to international students. In 2009–10, HESA statistics show there to be 123,940 undergraduates from outside the European Union (EU), representing 10.5 per cent, and 156,820 postgraduates, 12.7 per cent. The number of international students has doubled in the decade since 2000–01. The largest group from outside the EU comes from China, followed by India.

⁸ Thus, Donald MacRea, a sociologist from the LSE, writing on ‘The British Tradition in Social Anthropology’ in 1961, when such a thing still existed before the disciplinary fragmentation of the 1980s, said ‘the phrase social anthropology itself is very British’ (1961: 30).

cultural core of the West, which the United Kingdom benefits from (but to a lesser extent than Western societies with more 'open' immigration laws). The *World Social Science Report 2010* suggests that social scientists are more mobile than they have ever been (UNESCO 2010: 143), further restricting any claims about national social science traditions. It would be foolish to contend this.

My argument is more mundane. British social change posed intellectual challenges to social scientists based here (some of whom, after all, were not British by birth), which in part they helped analyse and understand through exploiting the global market in ideas. These intellectual challenges helped cement their view that the scientific study of society was worthwhile, irrespective of the national provenance of their ideas or people's ethnicity. British society made social science seem feasible in Britain.

British society from an early stage and for a very long time threw up issues that promoted social science engagement with it. Britain's economic progress and early industrialization, first in Scotland in the eighteenth century, then England in the nineteenth, encouraged the origins of economics; and the growth in imperial trade in particular witnessed the expansion of macroeconomics and econometrics, as well as business, accountancy and finance as sub-branches of economics. As Turner (2006a: 176) notes, so closely intertwined is the idea of the free market with the free society, whether established in the seventeenth century with Locke, the eighteenth with Smith or the nineteenth with Ricardo, that economic developments in Britain also shaped intellectual ideas about liberalism, which went on to influence social science disciplines like political science and sociology. It was nineteenth-century social change that gave urgency to sociology's interest in the negative consequences of commercialization and industrialization for social relationships, and thus sociology's dominating concerns in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with social inequality, class, poverty, distributive injustice, the social division of labour, alienation and the threat to the social bond deriving from an unfettered market.⁹

⁹ The contrast between the economic division of labour (the increasing specialization of work) and the social division of labour (the increasing specialization of society into classes) is worth emphasizing, for the former is rightly associated with the enhancement of productivity and trade, while the latter with inequality and social dislocation. The contrast sums up the different approach to the division of labour in economics and sociology well, and is exemplified by the varied usages of two Scots in the eighteenth century, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, both accredited with inventing the term but the former with an economic focus, the latter a sociological one (on which see Brewer 1986, 1989). Comparisons of the respective intellectual coherence of economics and sociology as disciplines interests sociologists for their envy of the coherence of economics (see Abbott 2001; Holmwood 2010).

Britain's early democratization and its emergence as the modern world's first parliamentary system fostered the development of political science, political theory and political sociology, as well as election studies; as did Britain's early urbanization for town planning, demography, human geography, social statistics and sociology. The development of a particular *kind* of politics in Britain, the emergence of paternalistic patrician politicians, one-nation Toryism and eventually the welfare state, shaped social science interest in this as a political expression of liberalism, as well as in the policy dimensions of social welfarism and its social consequences in British culture, the market and the state. Education, schooling, women's rights, gender and 'domestic' labour, health and medical care, poverty, slum clearance, transport policy, new town planning, citizenship rights and community rehousing are just a few of the intellectual concerns that fed into the separate social science disciplines as a result of the stimulus provided by British society and its social changes. And, of course, the link between IQ testing, the 11+ examination and policies of school selection gave psychology an additional input on top of whatever wider social concerns motivated its intellectual interest in childhood development, language acquisition and the link between poverty and infant nurturing.

One final example is worth citing to reinforce the point that British social science excelled because of what British society gave it as an initial intellectual stimulus. While there has been more British social anthropology in the post-colonial period (circa 1960) than during it, it is noteworthy that social anthropology in Britain grew apace arising from its connections to the country's colonial expansion and the need for colonial administration. This affected its area specialisms, particularly places where Britain's colonial expansion fuelled the greatest need (such as African studies and Asian studies), as well as disciplinary content (notably anthropological understanding of indigenous kinship systems, cultures and cultural beliefs in order to make sense of how its colonial territories worked). It shaped also its methodological preferences, since ethnography is premised on developing familiarization with foreign cultures. The extension of the 'exotic' anthropological tradition to the analysis of family and community life in a rapidly changing Britain, in the form of both rural and urban community studies, distances British social anthropology from the jibe of being the

handmaiden of imperialism,¹⁰ and helped lead to the development of community studies as one of the most significant forms of post-war social science, reducing further the intellectual barriers between geography, social anthropology and sociology. Many major figures in each of these disciplines started out first in one of the others. Such was this elision, that Radcliffe-Brown, one of the foremost progenitors of the British tradition in social anthropology, felt his discipline to be a form of ‘comparative sociology’.

Paradoxically, this elision between human geography, social anthropology and sociology has been cemented with Britain’s subsequent decolonization, for it accordingly stimulated British social science interest in ‘race’ relations, cross cultural contacts, immigration and housing, policies of cultural assimilation and multiculturalism and the like. Decolonization reinforced social change in Britain and, with it, shaped the subject matter of British social science. Not only did these concerns feed into the full range of social science disciplines, but they also helped give birth to new intellectual arenas, like cultural studies, black studies and post-colonial studies.

These intellectual issues also spurred methodological developments in the social sciences, ranging from sample surveys and IQ tests to qualitative interviewing and the community studies approach. According to Savage (2010), it was the combination of methodological advances and topic content that marked British social science as special in its formative years. He argued that developments in the technical apparatus of social science since World War II, particularly mass observation, interviewing and the social survey, encouraged both a scientific attitude towards data collection in practitioners, away from humanities and literary approaches, and enhanced their willingness to exploit the opportunities for social science research provided by technocratic and governmental demands for social science evidence to address problems around post-war social change. Based on analysis of seven major projects conducted between the 1940s and the 1970s, Savage emphasizes the blending that occurred

¹⁰ The allegation that social anthropology was complicit in colonial exploitation is rightly dismissed by Macdonald (2001), who shows that the discipline’s work was often at variance with the needs of colonial administrators, that practitioners were often left-leaning in their politics, and were more likely than not to support national independence in the societies they studied. Social anthropology was about protecting and defending the authenticity of the non-Western cultures they studied (Giddens 1996: 114). Nonetheless, it did initially benefit from the link with Empire for it had higher social status as a discipline than sociology or geography as a result of it being seen as a career – and a career for gentlemen (MacRea 1961: 36). As I make clear in the text however, the discipline has long transcended its origins.

between the methods for doing social science and the conceptual apparatus for making sense of the results, as the language of social groups, social relationships and social reproduction emerged from the technical apparatus for doing social science. All this helped generate a new kind of academic social science (which he contrasts with the amateurish ‘gentlemanly’ social science of the immediate pre- and post-war period).

Social science publishing accelerated in Britain in this period, as British-based publishing houses expanded their book and journal coverage of social science and, to feed the worldwide market interest in social science, themselves became global companies (to the point now where it is impossible to think of them anymore as British publishing houses). Some publish almost exclusively in social science, such as Polity Press and Sage, the latter also being a very substantial journal publisher in the social sciences (645 on the last count, with 245 journals connected to learned societies). There are also publications from learned societies in the social sciences, the Academy of Social Sciences itself, the ESRC and the various social science think tanks, policy research institutes and the like. Most of these are discipline- or thematic-based journals, but generic social science journals flourish, like the Academy of Social Sciences’ *Contemporary Social Science* and Elsevier’s *Social Science Research*. Proliferation, of course, is a measure of quantity; quality is something to which I return shortly.

The expanding market for social science knowledge in Britain is both cause and effect of the international profile of British social science, as companies globalized and the market increasingly became an English-speaking one, due to the dominating influence of the US market and the pressure overseas institutions are under to give their research greater international impact,¹¹ which French-speaking social science resented but could never rival, although the International Social Science Council is in Paris. The hegemony of English varies with social science disciplines. Economics is invariably English but the vernacular is more common in sociology, which is strong in France and

¹¹ Anglicization, which affects countries as different as Sri Lanka and Finland, results in overseas universities introducing monitoring procedures to ensure staff publish in international – which means English-medium – journals, which often requires that work is translated into English by private companies and in some cases by the English department in the university. The Polytechnic University of Milan, for example, announced in 2012 that from 2014, most of its courses will be conducted in English.

Germany. Social science subjects embedded in national contexts are more likely to use national languages and have their own journals. The rise of social science in the BRIC countries threatens the dominance of English as the language of social science publishing, but this anxiety only confirms that at the present time, British social science benefits from the market for social science publishing being Anglo-Saxon. The Thomson Social Science Citation Index records that 94.5 per cent of the articles published between 1998 and 2007 were in English (cited in UNESCO 2010: 151). And British social science helped to create this Anglo-Saxon domination. Scopus Social Science, one of several global citation indexes, covers close to 4,000 journals in the field, 13.4 per cent of which are in the United Kingdom; the United States has 30.2 per cent. Canada comes next at 5.6 per cent and China with 5.1 per cent (UNESCO 2010: 365).¹²

It is necessary here to point out, of course, that British social scientists do not benefit from an open-door policy from journal editors. In some cases, it is the reverse. In social science disciplines where US-based journals are dominant, UK academics can be forced to write to a US agenda. The government has sympathized with researchers in business and management, for example, who have complained of the dominance of US publications in their field, whose prestige makes them feel obliged to work on topics likely to be regarded favourably by their editorial boards, such as quantitative analysis of North American industry trends, rather than British or European problems (see <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/speeches/david-willetts-gareth-roberts-science-policy-lecture-2011>). British social science benefits immeasurably, in other words, where there are international quality journals based on its home territory, as especially does economics, sociology, human geography and political science, reinforcing the reputation of British social scientists and the quality of research on British and European issues. The number of overseas researchers working on aspects of British economic, political and social life and publishing in British-based journals adds both to the international quality of these journals and to the hegemony of the English language.

¹² Strikingly comparable figures for the period 1981–2000 are supplied by the Commission on the Social Sciences (2003: 56), showing Britain to be second behind the United States in the volume of cited works.

The 2011 University World Rankings for the social sciences, published by the *Times Higher Education* in conjunction with Thomson Reuters, also shows the dominance of the English-speaking world in social science, with only five places in the top 50-ranked social science universities coming from non-English-speaking countries (see *Times Higher Education* 2011: 36). Of course, these rankings are controversial and are driven by the methodologies on which they are based, but as the *World Social Science Report 2010* noted (UNESCO 2010: 235) they have become popular and are, therefore, required to be taken seriously. Given the bias in citation indexes in favour of articles and the obvious book writing culture in some social science disciplines – the International Social Science Council cites evidence that suggests between 40 and 60 per cent of social science literature is in book form (UNESCO 2010: 251) – world rankings under-represent the contribution of social science to a university's performance. But the rankings of the *Times Higher Education* are superior because they use peer review data alongside bibliometrics and offer rankings for social science alone without the distorting publishing and citation patterns in the sciences and medicine.¹³

There is one further part of the historical context to British social science that explains its international excellence. British universities, as special spaces for the practice of social science, are among the best in the world and their structure and management facilitated the intellectual effervescence of British social science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 2011 World Rankings by the *Times Higher Education* show that Britain has 32 universities in the top 200, more than any other country except the United States; about a third of Britain's HEIs grace the list of the world's best institutions (and the top 200 represent the world's topmost 1 per cent of universities). The then Editor of the *Times Higher Education*, Ann Mroz, pointed out that this is three times as many as Germany, four times as many as Australia and six times more than Japan. When GDP is taken into account (see Oswald 2011), thereby linking performance with population size and wealth, the United States drops from first spot to fourteenth and the United Kingdom is third. What this means, first,

¹³ Concerned about the British – and English-speaking – dominance in world rankings, the European Commission is currently testing a ranking formula called U-Multirank, developed by academics in Germany and The Netherlands, designed not to produce a league table but to allow students, policy makers, employers and universities to choose their own criteria to compare HEIs.

is that in terms of quality per pound invested in universities, Britain is ahead of the United States, and, secondly, while the United States dominates the list of the best HEIs, it has a long tail of poorly performing institutions, while the United Kingdom is good widely across the board. The United Kingdom has a critical mass of very good universities. This reflects in the 2011 social science rankings, where the United Kingdom has 9 HEIs listed in the top 50 universities for social science, 4 in the top 20, more than any other country save the United States. Only one other European country is listed, The Netherlands, with one HEI ranked. In short, British universities are special.

There are several reasons for this excellence. The right to practise as a social scientist in a British university was once constrained only by merit and the open, porous borders within British society and universities permitted waves of foreign intellectuals to escape persecution abroad to enrich British social science. British universities are free of religious and political domination by special interest groups, churches, private businesses and transnational corporations, and long-established principles of academic freedom, research autonomy and tenure once made them free of government control and regulation. The universities worked within financial tramlines set by government but otherwise were left free to run themselves. The separate social science disciplines and related professions were in charge of setting their own intellectual agendas, and key intellectual decisions were made by practitioners themselves.

The expansion of social science provision in British universities in the 1960s, with the emergence of new Robbins universities, and later in the 1990s with the ending of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics, was further encouragement to social science research, for it increased the critical mass of social science research, raised its international profile and allowed it to benefit from maximum occupational mobility. The world rankings for universities that are under 50 years old reveals the United Kingdom to have 5 in the top 20 and to have the largest number of any nation in the top 100 (with 20), reflecting, I think, the quality of the new Robbins universities established in Britain in the 1960s and the emergence of some strong post-1992 universities. Free public university education, which was reinforced for a long while by a system of maintenance grants for students from poorer economic backgrounds, also helped towards the utilization of human capital

for the benefit of social science recruitment and the reproduction of the next generation of practitioners.

What is more, successive British governments promoted social science research through their recognition of the need for national data sets to facilitate policy and planning, giving us comprehensive cohort studies with longitudinal data on a whole range of issues, as well as national surveys, producing significant data on crime, educational performance, social mobility, economic trends, birth studies and the rest (something that further assisted technical and methodological development in the social sciences). A lot of the responsibility for collecting and analysing this data went to social scientists in the universities, but it also facilitated the emergence of specialist independent social science research units, such as the Policy Studies Institute (<http://www.psi.org.uk/>), the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (<http://www.niesr.ac.uk/>) and the National Centre for Social Research (<http://www.natcen.ac.uk>), some of whom had long histories (on which see **Vignette 2**). There was also encouragement to the appointment of social scientists in the civil service, providing recruitment for waves of social science specialists. This threatens the place of universities in reproducing social science, to the anxiety of some university-based social scientists, but the expansion of social science in the think tanks and semi-independent research institutes is positive for the creation and consumption of social science knowledge, so long as it retains its quality, we are not sniffy about its problem-solving and policy orientation, and, in particular, the think tanks resist the temptation to be partisan (this cannot be taken for granted given some are aligned to political parties).¹⁴

Britain has, therefore, offered an unusually productive space for social science to develop and grow internationally. But scale is a measure of quantity; quality is quite different. There are two ways of approaching the quality of British social science, which we might call the 'great figure syndrome' and the 'critical mass argument'. The former inherently prejudices us towards the view that British social science is in decline; the other that it is uncommonly good across the board.

¹⁴ Byrne (2011: 188–9) has given a negative critique of the contribution of think tanks to applied social science research, raising concerns about their narrowness of target and focus, designed as most are to engage with government within a London-centricism, which tends to make them blind to circumstances outside the South East.

Vignette 2 Independent social research centres

It is very difficult for non-commercial social research agencies to be genuinely independent and financial exigencies have forced many to develop working relationships with universities. Most have a clear policy focus to assist in generating grant and consultancy income. The *National Centre for Social Research*, for example, which began in 1969 under the initiative of the late Sir Roger Jowell and Gerald Hoinville, became in 2008 a research centre associated with the LSE, although it retains its operational independence. It describes itself thus. 'We are experts in qualitative and quantitative methods and apply rigorous and robust research methodologies to greater understand complex social policy issues. We combine our technical expertise with an indepth understanding of the policy areas we work in to ensure the highest quality results.' As one example of its many commissioned researches, in 2011 it published a Report for the Cabinet Office on the summer riots that year in England (see Morrell et al. 2011), although the Home Secretary later said she 'wholly disagreed with many of the conclusions'. The *Policy Studies Institute* had a long history of independence but in 2009 it became a wholly owned subsidiary of the University of Westminster. The Policy Studies Institute takes a politically neutral stance on issues of public policy and has no connections with any political party, commercial interest or pressure group, with its income coming from funds for individual research projects received from a variety of competitive sources. It employs a large number of staff, organized in two multidisciplinary groups: environment, and work and social policy. The Institute collaborates with colleagues in the University of Westminster but also with many other semi-independent research institutes, such as the National Centre for Social Research, the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, the Institute of Employment Research, the Institute for Public Policy Research, as well as research centres more directly linked to universities. The Policy Studies Institute began in 1931 as Political and Economic Planning, set up as an independent think tank in response to the economic depression, and can claim credit for drawing up the blueprint for what became the National Health Service and the Race Relations Act. The Policy Studies Institute was formed in 1978 through the merger of Political and Economic Planning and the Centre for Studies in Social Policy, which had been established in 1972. In January 1998, the Policy Studies Institute became a wholly owned subsidiary company of the University of Westminster, fully merging with the University in April 2009. The Institute retains its name and continues to undertake policy-relevant research. It sees its mission 'to inform public policy and practice through the provision, dissemination and promotion of high quality research. Its vision is to be highly regarded and influential in social, economic

and environmental research'. In contrast the *National Institute of Economic and Social Research* has retained its independence. It is Britain's longest established independent economic research institute with over 60 years' experience of 'applying academic excellence to the needs of business and policy makers'. The Institute is independent of all party political interests. It receives no core funding from government and is not affiliated to any single university, although it undertakes projects in collaboration with leading academic institutions. The Institute's work falls into three distinct fields: economic modelling and macro analysis; education, training and employment; the international economy. Current programmes include work on productivity, pensions and the ageing population, trade and investment, European financial integration, labour markets and economic statistics. The Institute is part of the EUROFRAME network, an initiative for improved forecasting and macroeconomic analysis in the European Union set up in 1998 by nine independent European research institutes. It describes its mission statement as 'to promote, through quantitative and qualitative research, a deeper understanding of the interaction of economic and social forces that affect people's lives, and the ways in which policies can improve them'.

Where have all the giants gone?

Critics of Britain's audit culture attribute to it the blame for the disappearance of intellectual giants, for there is no personal motivation or incentive to ever become one; quite the opposite. Critics allege that the audit culture rewards those who beaver away in ever-diminishing silos, surrounded by those of their peers who can be relied on not to challenge them but to congratulate and thereby reinforce them in a continuous cycle of mutual gratification. Attractive as this is as an idea, the explanation is more complex. There is something about the very question that predisposes a negative answer. The great figure syndrome privileges the illustrious names from each discipline since the eighteenth century – many of whom qualify as British only by right of residing here, and some of whom migrated abroad after nurturing their reputations in Britain – and by positioning the classic texts within each social science discipline written by British authors. The list of such great figures and texts would be very long indeed – too long to mention here. Paradoxically, however, the great figure syndrome is highly affected both by scale, since the

smaller the field the easier it to dominate, and by time, for as scale has expanded down the years the harder it is to rise above the rest. Greatness, in short, is a comparative evaluation related to the size of the field and is time dependent. It is for this reason that the great figures of British social science are thought to exist primarily in its past, when the field was easier to dominate, or reside today primarily in small subfields, where advancement is conditioned by the scale of competition. This goes some way to explaining the lament in nearly every social science discipline that there are few – none – to rival the big names of yesteryear. On this measure, British social science is in decline.

This complaint, however, is as much oriented to quantity as quality, for it was genuinely easier to be an intellectual giant when fields were new, undeveloped and relatively sparsely populated. This also puts into higher relief the true intellectual stardom of those contemporary figures – again, too invidious to mention – with reputations that transcend small subfields. The irony, of course, is that the lack of distance we have from these great figures because of the relative newness of the social sciences, coupled with the close attention the social sciences have paid to their intellectual history as part of disciplinary specialization, reinforces the great figure syndrome precisely at a time when their scale inhibits such goliaths emerging, or doing so to the sort of universal acclaim and recognition that greeted them in the past. This condemns social scientists today to forever feel that their peers lack the quality of their ancestors.¹⁵

It is for this reason that critical mass arguments offer an alternative way to assess the standing of British social science. The great figure syndrome significantly under-enumerates the quality-in-depth within British social science that lies beneath the great figures of the past and which characterizes the quality of the HE system as a whole rather than a few elite individuals. Strength in depth is the defining characteristic of British social science; and the mass is not standing on the shoulders of these giants, it is commanding height enough as it stands.

We have already seen, as a measure of this, the position of British universities in the 2011 world rankings for social science. Let us consider more. The research assessment exercise (RAE) is the bane of most academics' lives as

¹⁵ It is my impression that reputations are not best measured by citations during someone's lifetime, but in retrospect, for citations – even for the most popular figures – mostly die off with them, leaving them to be rediscovered some decades later as part of intellectual history. The great figure syndrome, in other words, is inherently predisposed to favour the long since dead.

one of the key components of the audit culture in British higher education. It is, in the view of the Commission on the Social Sciences (2003: 9), a relentless treadmill, but they nonetheless saw the RAE as useful for highlighting the health and quality of social science research in Britain (2003: 52–6). There is a sense in which the RAE has distorted publishing patterns, accelerating the move into print, valorized the high impact journals and publishing houses, and discouraged the quiet contemplation of ideas ahead of publishing them. It has, however, had some positive effects (elaborated in Brewer 2011a: 9–12), one of which is to show the international research excellence of social science subjects objectively rather than relying on High Table gossip or the prejudices of university managements dominated by the old professions. In the 2008 exercise, 4* research was described as ‘world leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour’ and 3* as ‘internationally excellent’ in the same terms. The proportion of 3*/4* research across the social science units of assessment is revelatory, as shown in Table 2.2.

This strikes home that assessments of this level of international distinction never fell below 43 per cent of the evaluated outputs and in some cases was considerably higher. The average over the social sciences as a whole was 52 per cent. That is to say, taken as a group, one in two pieces of work produced by social scientists in Britain submitted for assessment was deemed internationally excellent. This is critical mass, and I wish to labour the point.

Table 2.2 2008 RAE scores

Social science unit of assessment	% 3*/4*
Geography	56
Economics/Econometrics	77
Business and Management	53
Law	49
Politics and International Relations	44
Social Work and Social Policy	53
Sociology	48
Anthropology	57
Development Studies	49
Psychology	45
Education	43
Average for sector as a whole	52

Source: Annex D, National Comparative Data, *RAE 2008: The Outcome*, December 2008, available at <http://www.rae.ac.uk/results/outstore/raeoutcomeannexes/pdf>.

The ESRC has been keen to establish value for money in the social science research it funds, and while this is usually something social scientists rail against, a useful by-product has been the benchmarking exercises it has conducted to assess British social science against international standards of quality. These began in 2005 and have been conducted for social anthropology, politics and international studies, economics, sociology and psychology; in 2012, human geography was set underway (see <http://esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-evaluation/UK-human-geography.aspx?dm/>). The assessments have been conducted by panels of subject specialists from overseas. Their reports are public documents available on the ESRC's website (see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-evaluation/international-benchmarking.aspx>).¹⁶ Some extracts are worth quoting. The social anthropology panel stated: 'clearly the UK has been one of the intellectual heartlands of Anthropology; the quality of current work remains very high . . . The panel noted a lengthy list of areas of particular strength, topics in which UK Social Anthropology was indeed an intellectual leader.' The politics panel found 'considerable evidence of research quality across almost all the principal sub-disciplines . . . there is truly outstanding research in the UK profession.' The economics report stated 'the research achievements of United Kingdom scholars are exceptional by world standards; the UK economics profession is more prominent than any other country's except for the United States . . . It has attained world leadership in microeconometrics.' The comparison with the United States featured also in the sociology panel: 'it compares extremely well in a wider international frame as, perhaps, being second only to the US.' It went on: 'we attest UK sociology to be at the international forefront with its intellectual performance and research output.' 'The panel's headline finding', stated the psychology report, 'is that, overall, the quality is very high, bettered only by psychology research from the USA. In a substantial number of areas, UK psychology research is unsurpassed anywhere in the world.'

Lest it be thought that research quality is a narrow test of the standing of British social science, it is worth emphasizing that social science teaching is regarded as being excellent in quality (Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 61). The incentives to fix any problems identified through teaching

¹⁶ ESRC website accessed 31 October 2011.

evaluations, whether those done institutionally by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or through universities' internal evaluation procedures, are very high, much higher than the loss of quality research funding (QR) through poor quality research, since the bulk of income is for teaching (formerly the block grant, and now fees). To support this judgement about teaching quality, it is worth employing statistical evidence from the national student satisfaction surveys conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England as part of its teaching quality assurance procedures.¹⁷ The academy's attitude towards them is ambivalent, even hostile (see Furedi 2012), and given their unreliability, people complain most about the way results are utilized by public relations managers and find their way into league tables. These rankings are limited as a measure of quality inasmuch as the learning experience is greater than the level of 'overall satisfaction' expressed in it, and when disaggregated to the level of individual institutions, these surveys are hugely distorted by very low response rates. But the numbers of respondents for each discipline nationally are very reliable; and since every university participates, they are the only national measure available of teaching quality (the Quality Assurance Agency's subject reviews across UK HEIs have been abandoned long since and the original reviews are now very out of date; sociology's, for example, dates from 1995, mass communication from 1997, psychology and politics from 2000, and economics from 2001). The National Student Survey, therefore, while not perfect, supplies the only data we have (the results are remarkably consistent over time, which is another measure of the survey's reliability).

The 2010 results are summarized in Table 2.3. This shows that in every case, at least eight out of ten social science students in the major subject categories expressed overall satisfaction with the quality of the teaching they received. In all cases but one this was above the average for all the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) subject categories. With respect to the social sciences, the number of respondents was 57,115, a large enough sample for the results to be reliable. It is a profound irony that the government is dismantling public universities, in which students clearly have satisfaction,

¹⁷ HEFCE website, consulted 31 October 2011. These surveys are national and not restricted to England. In 2010–11, the survey cost £2.1 million to administer (*Times Higher Education*, 8 March, 2012, p. 5).

Table 2.3 National student survey 2010

Subject category	Number of respondents	% Overall satisfaction
Business and administration	22940	80
Education	3865	81
Geographical studies	4230	88
Law	8805	85
Social studies	17275	81
All subjects	177400	81

Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_11/11_11.pdf).

when the level of satisfaction expressed in government barely reaches three out of every ten respondents.¹⁸

If I can conclude this assessment of the standing of British social science in a pithy manner, there is a critical mass of international quality teaching and research done within British social science. If the world reputation of British universities makes them a crown of the nation, the social sciences are one of its brightest jewels. However, there is great anxiety among social scientists that government higher education policies are vandalizing them. There is a deep paradox within this fear.

What is the general impact of the social sciences?

The impact debate in higher education is one of the key components of the current conjuncture affecting the demise of the public university. Most systems of higher education involve some feature of public accountability and audit – the evaluation of grant applications in the United States and The Netherlands involves an assessment of the impact of the research, for example, and Australia has a form of research assessment exercise (see Donovan 2011) – but Britain exemplifies its fullest expression. While the impact debate in Britain needs to be placed within the wider audit culture that shapes British universities, and will be discussed as part of that analysis in the next chapter, it is worth beginning with a reminder that the social sciences are high impact subjects. Impact comes

¹⁸ The 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, revealed that only 29 per cent of respondents trusted the government and 12 per cent thought they were handling ‘important tasks’ well. See <http://www.edelman.co.uk/2012/01/levels-of-trust-hit-new-lows-among-uk-public-survey-finds/>.

from their subject matter – the social nature of culture, the market and state, across time and place – and the social sciences have the least to be worried about in displaying that their research has influence in society.¹⁹

Impact is also, for this reason, embedded in the history and development of British social science. The social sciences emerged in Britain out of natural and moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a diagnosis of the social condition ('social' is used here in its inclusive sense). This was initially employed in the seventeenth century among political theorists like Locke and Hobbes to deal with issues of political disorder, religious warfare and the proper balance between government and individual powers and rights; then in eighteenth-century Scotland to make sense of the economic features of commercialism and economic growth, by Adam Smith among others, and the effects of commercialization and proto-industrialization on society, such as Adam Ferguson's analysis of urbanization, alienation and the social division of labour, Millar's work on social class, Lord Kames on race and comparative mythology, Lord Monboddo on language or Dugald Stewart on comparative history and early anthropology. John Millar was a professor of civil law, and this equipped him to write on the history of English government, the origins of social class and status distinctions, and gender differences, among many other things.

These have many predecessors and intellectual history searches for early precursors as part of its *raison d'être* – for example, the Greeks in politics, Ibn Khaldun in sociology, the mercantilists in economics – but, to use the history of economic thought as the exemplar, what differentiates classical economics in eighteenth-century Scotland from the economic speculations that preceded Adam Smith was the recognizably modern problems he was dealing with, such as the rise of manufacturing and production rather than just trade, creating a modern conceptual field that included notions like the division of labour,

¹⁹ Shearer West, former director of research for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), is quoted in the *Times Higher Education* on 3 November 2011 as saying that the arts and humanities disciplines have the potential to benefit more than the sciences from the inclusion of impact in the REF provided methods of measurement are handled intelligently and staff overcome their resistance and embarrassment at demonstrating impact. Writing in the same issue Bill Amos, an evolutionary geneticist (in other words from a science background), disparaged scientists concerned to display impact as Dr Plods, primarily bureaucrats adequate at doing science and more keen to get funding than do pioneering research, whom he contrasted with Dr Sparks, people who live and breathe science, who are passionate and innovative in their research. We might call their respective views 'the impact war', another battle in an ongoing conflict between what Kagan (2009) calls the three cultures.

surplus and economic growth. My point is that the tempo of economic change gave the mid-eighteenth century a suite of problems sufficiently modern to lead to the development of classical economics as a discipline. The same is true for public law, sociology, politics and anthropology; only psychology, with its history based in Germany and the United States, can be said not to have developed in this period. With this notable exception, the social sciences were brought into being as disciplines to emerge out of natural and moral philosophy precisely to diagnose, analyse and solve the problems of modernity.²⁰ Active engagement with culture, the market and the state is part of their roots. Impact is what they were designed for. And this impulse for engagement continued throughout their growth and development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One example of twentieth-century growth will have to suffice. The Fabian tradition of social policy is epitomized by the career of Peter Townsend, who was for a time professor of sociology at Essex but who engaged directly with issues of fundamental social importance to the discipline of social policy (what had earlier been called 'social administration'), such as ageing, health inequalities and, above all, poverty. The arguments between the Fabians – people like Titmuss, Abel Smith and Townsend – were not in the technocratic service of governance but part of a specific social democratic political project that nonetheless helped shape post-war government policy in Britain, as Savage (2010) wonderfully captures. Among other things, Townsend was co-founder of the Child Poverty Action Group in 1965, and its chair for 20 years and Life President from 1989. He also co-founded the Disability Alliance in response to the Thalidomide scandal and chaired it for 25 years.

The impact we are referring to here, however, is quite different in kind from that envisaged in the current impact debate. We need to distinguish, therefore, between two meanings to the notion of impact, its technical and general senses. Its technical meaning is that one which is employed within British higher education policy, where it refers to the value-for-money of the expenditure on higher education as measured by its benefits. Impact is about what society gets from the universities, and in particular from the money given

²⁰ This is far from being an original argument, for it is part of the intellectual history of every social science discipline to see its chief spur coming from the analysis of modernity. One of the earliest to claim that the social sciences emerged out of moral philosophy in eighteenth-century Scotland was Gladys Bryson (1932a, 1932b, 1945).

them for research. This technical meaning is further narrowed by pressures to restrict benefits to economic ones; and the nature of the current impact debate among policy makers, academics and politicians is precisely about the feasibility of employing an economic notion of value-for-money for most disciplines. It is a near universal complaint common across all three cultures, from pure science subjects and the humanities to the social sciences, that the technical meaning of impact is inappropriate for their kind of research. The value-for-money emphasis is widely felt as unsuitable since the research output is only loosely connected to – or not even capable of being directly tied to – the money input, and the narrow attention to economic benefits is inapt. Objections are not based around any inability to produce research outputs, or a wish for unaccountability; it is the nature of their influence that is in dispute.

Impact in its general meaning refers to the influence of research in society (that is, in culture, the market and the state), with influence being unrestricted in its nature and effects, nor by time and the money input. If impact in its technical sense is value-for-money, in its general sense impact is value-for-society. Value-for-money and value-for-society are quite different forms of value. Social scientists are fully aware that they must engage with impact in this general sense, and recently there have been case studies of work collated from the medium past which have addressed it. John Scott (2011), for example, draws together a collection that has Eileen Barker reflecting on the impact of her research on the Moonies for our understanding of cult wars, Susanne MacGregor on drugs and a team from the Plymouth Business School on their work with local government. A web blog run from the LSE, 'The Impact of Social Science' (<http://bit.ly/ru/1Uql>) is devoted to demonstrating the impactful nature of the social sciences, and has an electronic book associated with it entitled *Handbook for Maximizing Impact* (<http://blog.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialscience/the-handbook>), prepared by the School's Public Policy Group.

Current controversies about impact encouraged Crow and Takeda (2011) to look back on the late Ray Pahl's early work on the intersection of human geography, urban sociology and social anthropology, describing him as having had a career of 'fifty years of impact'. Brewer and Hayes (2011) reflected on the impact of social science studies of post-conflict societies, and there have been

several surveys of the impact of general fields within contemporary social science undertaken by the Academy of Social Sciences under the rubric *Making the Case for Social Science*. The cases cover topics like well-being (February 2010), ageing (June 2010), sustainability, the environment and climate change (November 2010), crime (June 2011), sport and leisure (November 2011) and management (June 2012), available as pamphlets (see the Academy website at <http://www.acss.org.uk/publication.htm>). The British Academy's Policy Centre has published booklets on topics as contrasting as electoral systems (2010), stress at work (2010), family policies (two, both 2010), climate change (2011) and heritage (2011) (see <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/policy-centre-reports.cfm>). The ESRC has produced a video it calls *Celebrating the Social Sciences* with eight cases 'where research made a difference', with an accompanying booklet with another 11 cases (see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/publications/multimedia/index.aspx>), ranging, it says 'from military operations in Afghanistan and changing prison practices to reducing firesetting of grasslands and helping young people become more resilient'. The video was launched in November 2011 at a special event attended by the Universities Minister, David Willetts, who spoke in praise of the social sciences and the ESRC (details of his speech will be addressed in the next chapter but it is carried on his personal web blog at <http://blogs.bis.gov.uk/blog/2011/11/08/celebrating-the-value-and-relevance-of-the-social-sciences/>). Countries which have had impact assessments as part of research grant allocation for a long time, such as The Netherlands, report positive experiences (see Benneworth 2011). Even strident critics of the impact agenda recognize that it is easy for the social sciences to demonstrate their value in this general sense (for example, Collins 2011).

These are issues I will be coming back to, but it is worthwhile noting that in these terms the social sciences can be the most impactful of the three cultures in this general sense, but this is sometimes lost on social scientists themselves when they focus narrowly on combating the technical meaning of impact. However, the two meanings get confused and wrapped up with one another: to the point where I will suggest later that impact as 'value-for-society' is so contaminated by the technical meaning of impact (where it is 'value-for-money'), that we should move the discourse on to more consensual ground and refer to public value more generally.

In order to illustrate the confusion in the meanings of impact, it is useful to return to the ESRC benchmarking reports.²¹ To do so will appear ironic since the ESRC is one of the main mediums by which the technical meaning of impact is being imposed. The international assessment panels oscillated between general and technical meanings when commenting on the impact of the social science subjects they were assessing. ‘UK psychology research’, its report noted, ‘has a considerable impact on policy and practice’. The economics report stated that ‘economic research in the UK is very influential outside academia and has a large impact on policy. This is a major achievement that results from the high-quality of applied work and the healthy relationship between researchers and policymakers’. Other reports, however, while noting policy impacts, moved well beyond the technical meaning. ‘Social Anthropology’, its panel wrote, ‘has had a signal effect in development policy and practice within the UK and beyond, and Social Anthropologists have become key figures in human rights, asylum and other justice-related work. When viewed from our external perspective, UK Social Anthropology seems considerably more recognized in terms of policy consultations, “cultural” briefings and expert testimony’. The politics and international studies panel ‘found considerable evidence of engagement with end-users in the policy community. We found even more evidence of knowledge transfer. If academic research is thought of as a kind of cultural formation, Politics and International Studies contributes greatly to social, cultural and intellectual capital throughout the wider UK community’. Clearly, even the ESRC is incapable of making the technical meaning of impact hegemonic and the broader meaning keeps breaking through to cloud the impact debate. The contest over meaning is part of the current impact war. The key question, therefore, is whose meaning counts? I take up this question in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In its national context, the scale of British social science rivals the natural sciences and humanities; it might be the interloping third culture but, if I could use an analogy from the Holy Trinity, the scale of the social sciences

²¹ Found at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-evaluation/international-benchmarking.aspx>, consulted on 31 October 2011. It is noticeable that the sociology panel was the only one that did not comment on impact in its executive summary.

in Britain now makes it equivalent to the other two, more three-in-one than one of three. Internationally, however, it is smaller scale. But what is small in number is large in general impact. The international excellence of British social science makes substantial parts of it truly world class, second only to the United States in international quality (this is the judgement also of the Commission on the Social Sciences 2003: 67). British society had a large effect on the growth and development of this international excellence in the past. What is distinctive about social science in contemporary Britain is the critical mass of its excellence. The great figure syndrome causes many to lament the demise of the goliaths of the past, but this disguises the way in which their reputations were socially constructed by time and scale, and this complaint seriously under-enumerates the critical mass of internationally excellent work done by social scientists in Britain today. However, it is the very *quality* of social science in Britain that is the issue at stake. International excellence puts into particularly high relief the widespread anxiety among social scientists that they are being threatened – that the government is potentially destroying the wisdom of the wise.