

Brexit and the “Real World” Impact Debate: Some Reflections on the Role of Social Sciences

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Since becoming Director of the Centre for Brexit Studies at Birmingham City University, the UK’s first ever research centre devoted to the study of all things Brexit, I have found it challenging to keep my academic hat of “objective aloofness” on.

After all, Brexit strikes to the heart of the future trajectory of the UK’s economic and social relationship to Europe and the rest of the world.

And of course, we cannot forget the comment by Michael Gove during the lead-up to the referendum in June 2016 about how he thought the country had “had enough of experts”.

Such comments might seem throw-away at the time, but they have a habit of staying around and haunting any subsequent discourse on the matter.

And I say this because they strike right at the heart of the role of the academic in matters relating to economic and social issues – that is, to what extent do our values impact on our judgments and hence “lines of argument” in conducting academic research.

And of course, for academics, research traditionally has been a painstaking lengthy process involving prolonged reflection and critical review prior to publishing their findings – a process that can take years (as with publication in an academic journal).

Given the media profile of Brexit as an issue, the accelerated staccato pace of referendum campaigning and various (often outrageous) claims and counter-claims being made, presented a stark contrast to the slow, deliberate methodical pace of academic inquiry.

As a result, legitimate academic findings were often lost in the noise that accompanied pre-referendum sound-bites. Likewise, these findings are typically subtle – for example, estimates that range from a 2% to 10% reduction in per capita GDP fail to excite in the same way as promises of £350million a week for the NHS.

In this context, for academics, Brexit (for whom the vast majority appear to have voted against¹) brings up difficult issues in terms of whether one’s role is merely to observe and comment on the process as it unfolds, or to explicitly argue for or against.

As such, their viewpoints (or underlying values, the study of which is referred to as *axiology*) pierce right to the heart of to what extent academic judgments in the social sciences can ever be value-

¹ For example, see a YouGov poll of academic staff, in which 81% of respondents voted “Remain”. Accessed at https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8436/YouGov-Brexit-HE-bill-survey/pdf/YouGov_survey_Brexit_HE_Bill.pdf

free? Of course, for Mr. Gove to utter his comment on “experts” only exposed his own value-laden judgments, but that is beside the point.

What the “debate” on “experts” has highlighted is questions of trust by the wider public in “facts” and “arguments” put forward to analyse the impact of Brexit in a so-called “post-truth” world where opposing views are labelled by protagonists as “fake news”.

For me, it comes down to basic integrity in calling things as I see them, and using evidence to shape and inform my views, even if this challenges any preconceived notions on my part. Or as Howard Becker put it in 1967 (“Whose side are we on?”) that “[o]ur problem is to make sure that, whatever point of view we take, our research meets the standards of good scientific work, that our unavoidable sympathies do not render our results invalid.”²

This does indeed rely on a modicum of trust that data in the public domain is indeed “factual” and not just “lies, damned lies and statistics”.

However, to abandon this trust is to put us back into a whirlwind where basic prejudices and unfounded beliefs could be passed off as “reasonable” because they are derived from the premise that the only knowledge deemed valuable would be that filtered through the lens of one’s own direct experience (e.g., that the world is flat because when I look at the horizon it is flat).

In a climate where facts are denigrated and trust in public institutions such as universities is eroded, thoughts that “outrage one’s conscience”, as George Orwell in his famous 1945 essay, “The Prevention of Literature”³ once characterised a heretic as rebelling against, could become legitimate, and thus lead to a situation where perversions of thought become part of the mainstream.

It is thus the job of the academic, he or she being paid to sift “fact” from opinion, to guard against this, and to engage with the wider layperson to explain ideas clearly and cogently.

² <https://www.scribd.com/document/246422228/Howard-Becker-Whose-Side-Are-We-On>

³ http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/prevention/english/e_plit