

Social Responsibility and Academic Work: Thoughts inspired by and in honour of Jonathan Rosenhead

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Thanks

Great pleasure

- to be able to comment on and celebrate JR
- as person
- as exemplar of an engaged academic

This conference is timely, not just to celebrate JR's august age or eminence (tho' both of those!)

In this talk I want to focus on Social Responsibility and Academic Work.

The phrases trip off the tongue but cover a multitude of interpretations:

- Social Responsibility is troublesome for Academic Work
- Academic work punctures Social Responsibility
- It is tricky working out what Social Responsibility means:
 - o To whom?
 - o Measured how?

LSE of course was founded to be a kind of academic training and education think-camp for an earlier notion of social responsibility.

So...it's not new to debate whether and how the two projects can be twinned or elided.

The Fabian route was élitist in the way only Fabianism managed, as we know

- The LSE like all Universities has lost its way on occasions
- (My mother was a graduate here under Laski in the 1930s so I was brought up to revere the LSE)
- It too was driven back in the post-Rothschild era and subdued by the Sir Keith Joseph attacks on social (rather than economic) sciences

My point is that academics can only define social responsibility when and if they have the space to do so:

- academic 'freedom' is overblown somewhat as a concept. Why should academics have freedom any more than others?
- The point is that academics' work-space is shaped by wider social forces like everyone's

BUT the LSE in its ups and downs has also been a wonderful location for JR and an inspiring hotbed for all of us for thinking about:

- where society is going
- the role of social science in that process
- the pursuit and definition of the public interest and common good

JR has been a long exponent of how good critical thought enriches society and learning simultaneously.

I cannot imagine anywhere where he would have been able to do what he has as appropriately as the LSE.

The LSE has given JR:

- a marvellous collection of colleagues with which to engage inside
- a base from which to look inside and out.

Academics who aspire to be socially responsible require such a mix.

To question one needs intellectual space.

This intellectual challenge is inevitably a juggling act:

- knowing the terrain
- knowing the professional responsibilities
- edging and pushing across boundaries
- making connections
- translating complex language and thoughts into terms which are usable and useful

The key thing about this role of the engaged academic is:

- Engaged on what?
- With and for whom?
- How?
- With what effect?

For me, this is a question of working with movements, not personal whim.

It would be wrong to pitch the Academics & Social Responsibility discourse as about heroic individuals.

It's about movements - which shape us and which we can work with or against.

JR's CV is not just long, august and diverse but endlessly both before and of its time.

Reading his CV when preparing this paper, I filled in various gaps about JR.

He was modelling consumer behaviour long before social scientists 're-discovered' the consumer as a key player

His paper:

- J Rosenhead 'Simulation Models of Consumer Behaviour', *British Journal of Marketing*, Vol 4,3 (Autumn 1970).

As someone who frequently watches large ships standing off the coast of N Wales before the run in to Liverpool, and also watches canal boats navigate the early 19th lock outside my mother-in-law's house in the Midlands, I am intrigued to see he wrote a paper:

- 'The Simulation of a Ship Entrance Lock (with M.J. Kent). In *Digital Simulation in Operational Research*, English Universities Press (1967).

JR's earliest papers – as we have heard – were from within that great World War 2 legacy of Operations Research, about which I was taught as a psychology student in the 1960s – when he was doing it!

I first met JR through the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science (BSSRS)

This was a respectable, liberal body founded in 1969.

It brought together – as JR knows – a diverse group of engaged academics, scientists mostly, and political activists.

It was a direct descendent of the 1930s University's Left and Progressive Scientists: Which ranged from paid-up communists to liberals and welfarists.

In my own area of food policy, that earlier generation had had a HUGE & lasting influence.

They had:

- researched the inadequacy of diets and illhealth due to diet
- pushed it into the policy machinery eg via the BMA, the ILO, the League of Nations
- Championed it in and outside parliament
- Worked with and listened to the working poor
- Provided evidence for social justice movements

This issue of evidence and its relationship to policy and practice is something which still troubles modern policy.

One view of Academia's Social Responsibility is that we have a duty to provide evidence for policy. To help reduce the evidence-policy-practice gap. To transform the messy relationship:

- policy without evidence,
- partial evidence,

- mistaken evidence,
- fragmented evidence.

The Fabian ideal, here, is to provide truth and consistency. Rationality and efficiency.

While understanding the motives, I think we have to ask:

- evidence for whom?
- Whose evidence?
- What frames the questions that generates evidence?
- (in other words, does academia have suitable evidence on the right questions?)

Back in the mid 20th century, that generation's politics covered a wide range – from patrician Tory to structural change seekers

Their work – linking science for the public good - became respectable in the WW2.

- Defining physiological needs was a strategic necessity.
- The Social Good was defined by the wider context.
- Production was to be the answer to social need.

Lack of food and affordability could be resolved by:

- unleashing productive power
- reducing waste
- ensuring distribution efficiencies

That generation articulated a once radical agenda which became normalised. Their social responsibility became our normality:

- Increasing output was possible by applying science and capital
- Science and technology could fill the gap that society created.
- Look (if you want proof) at Boyd Orr's World of Plenty film, WW2 propaganda

Then along came the Bomb and with the hardening of the Cold War, nuclear politics dominated.

Big Politics took over.

This was the cauldron from which BSSRS emerged.

It was founded at a meeting at the Royal Society, sponsored by 60+ Fellows at a meeting of over 300 people

Participating groups included:

- The Royal Society itself
- Scientists against the Bomb
- CND
-

It was spawned at the same time as Science for the People in the USA where groups like Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action (SESPA).

This bubbling of thinking about science was very much part of the 1960s and 70s radical discourse:

- a questioning of values
- assertion of lifestyle politics
- Emergence of women's and radical movements
- a rejection of conservatism
- a rejection of / questioning of the Old Left
- a rejection of the Use/Abuse model of science & technology:

A core notion was the questioning of the view that Sci & Techn.y are neutral and that what matters is the uses to which they are put.

The new view was that neutrality is itself a social construct:

- what matters is how Sci & Techy are used
- who uses them is shaped by how they are defined and set up
- Sci & Tech are social processes

The BSSRS and late 20th century radical science movement's history and role must be set alongside many other movements bridging activism and academia:

- radical philosophy
- conference of socialist economists
- history workshop
- radical psychology / therapy
- etc

BSSRS was extraordinarily fertile in spawning and nurturing wonderful groups:

- Radical Statistics
- Politics of Health Group
- Agricapital (which I was a member of)
- Hazards
- Radical Science Journal
- Etc

When BSSRS was folded in the late 1980s, it was with some regret. But organisations can outlive their usefulness.

Actually we could do with BSSRS today. The Royal Society could do with a ginger group. That role is played by the environment and food & health movements, perhaps.

The Science & Society Trust remains – with JR still there.

The special value of BSSRS was that it encouraged / demanded a focus on science.

It went well beyond the formidable thinking of science activists - the Hogbens, Huxleys, Polanyis, Mellanbys,...(see Gary Werskey's *Visible College*)

It struggled to explore the role of Science and Technology in daily life:

- transport
- health
- food
- education
- reproduction (bodies)
- the technology of political control
 - o NB This was the time when Northern Ireland was exploding

BSSRS allowed people like me to flap our wings in discussions and in learning, and to produce booklets and articles.¹

It did what good academia in pursuit of Social Responsibility does:

- teach us
- nurture us
- criticise us
- develop us
- move us on
- give us critical friendship

All conversations and publications centred on science, technology and engineering

- Is science an ideology?
- Is science framed by ideology?
- How can science be distinct from ideology?

The arguments were about:

- what are science and engineering for?
- Can, and if so how can, scientists work for the public good?

JR's greatest impact on me personally was his work with others on the Politics of Technology.

The use of hard (material) and soft (psy-ops) goods to control populations.

As a social psychology student, this hugely influenced me. Probably too much, actually, in that it turned me AGAINST all or most of psychology!

Like others, I started wondering if there could be a liberation Psychology.

- a Mass Psychology (the tradition of Fromm, Reich, Marcuse)

Today, as then, it often seems to me that

¹ See the note by Colin Thunhurst on the Science & Society Trust in 1979.
<http://www.radstats.org.uk/no015/thunhurst.pdf>

- Half of psychology seems to work for the consciousness industries in advertising, marketing, polling,
- The other half works as therapists!

One half pushing people towards the cliff edge. The others trying to catch them one by one as they totter or fall.

I continued on these arguments in food policy rather than psychology, per se.

So JR and BSSRS' impact – and my debt to them – was and remains immense.

The books and reports and debates from the 1970s led me to question my till then fairly straight view that psychology was about helping people.

- Social Responsibility defined as guide dog

I developed an interest in what I would call Mass Psychology or what we'd call Cultural Change:

- who and what drives changes in how people think and conceive of their worlds
- the role of culture as change agent.

There was a fertile coming together of really good scientists from diverse disciplines under BSSRS' aegis:

- From brain scientists...
- To...cultural theorists

The joy was and is its multi-disciplinarity

- a key element to bridging Academia & Soc Responsibility

BSSRS's Technology of Political Control Group produced a rich and radical strain of work on mass control techniques;

- the hard edge
- not matters for student pondering

From Ackroyd et al's *Technology of Political Control* (for Penguin in 1977)
To *Techno-Cop* (for Free Association Books in 1985).

For someone like me, this gave real 'bite' to the rather esoteric discussion about individuals in mass society.

The history of BSSRS urgently needs to be written.

- I want to embarrass JR and others into doing that
- Charlie Clutterbuck, its first employee at 9 Poland Stree, has offered to collate
- But that historical collation requires long memories to be pooled

The TITLE of BSSRS is significant.

It was 'soft'.

Social Responsibility implied:

- liberalism not socialism
- social democracy not workers' democracy
- amelioration not structural change

Yet BSSRS – and JR was in the thick of it throughout – spawned a remarkable tradition:

- pushing
- crossing boundaries
- questioning

There were splits over politics:

- the respectable FRSs left fairly quickly
- but Maurice Wilkins Nobel Prizewinner for DNA remained to the end
- the arguments continued among variants of the Left

BSSRS became very much being a 'young guard' body:

- Hairy rather than besuited
- alternative technology (eg the magazine Undercurrents)

Gone was the 1930s view that Academic Social Resp.y was a kind of Fordism for the People:

- social utilitarianism
- top down
- elite defined for the masses to use
- social engineering by design

40 years on, where are we?

Today we are coming out of another 25 year love affair.

- the neo-liberal model of growth as progress.
- Individualism as change agents
- Markets as definers of Social Responsibility
- Academia as a market
- Research as contributor to competitiveness and business efficiency

The culture now – I parody slightly – is of Personalisation not Soc Resp.y

This time it is not Science which is aspiring to Social Responsibility but Corporations.

CSR and CR have cornered the 'soft' thinking.

Companies can offset difficulties by putting some small change into:

- Ethics
- Community projects
- organics
- forest-friendliness
- fair trade
- 'healthy' alternatives

- Etc

Yet the so-called credit crunch has seen the crumbling of such amelioration approaches.

Humanity is faced with some pretty stark and serious choices about futures.

Indeed, the culture of CHOICE is part of the problem.

- Choice is talked about as though it is fixed
- It is a range.
- Shaped by context and location.

Again some of the BSSRS type distinctions are in play:

- hi tech vs low tech
- top down science vs bottom up (but where are those being articulated?)
- people-led routes to technology vs technology shaping behaviour
- issues of power and control
- who makes the profits?
- Whose wages are greatest?
- Who chooses how much? Who doesn't and cannot?

The core weakness of CSR / CR is power. Those who promote CSR retain power. CSR is self-regulated not socially regulated.

It opens up a not-so-subtle 'game' of building and puncturing reputations.

The notion of - and definition of – the public interest is retained by those with power.

Yet the events of 2008-09 have seriously dented that.

Yet the situation at the end of the 21st century's first decade is one which JR and his colleagues were engaged with at the end of the 1960s:

- nuclear power (back again) → the answer to Climate Change?
- neo-cold war (back too) → now over energy (Middle East oil Russian gas)
- religious politics → not just N Ireland but global
 - o NB JR's v honourable role on Israel / Palestine
- the role of technology → GM as the technical fix for hunger? (really?!)
- the vigilance society and civil liberties → CCT + Google streetview
- Consumerism as progress -→ an on-going debate about Growth & Progress linkage eg. Tim Jackson)
- first World/Third World → never went but now with new form
 - o Obesity signifies the poor in Developed countries and the new middle class in Developing Countries

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Where has this taken us?

To consider Academia and Social Responsibility is not a simple matter.

It raises complexity when society seeks principles

It suggests that we have to think about processes not fixed bearings.

It links problems of evidence with the 'real world'

Much though we can celebrate our heroes and heroines, this is about movements not just Scientists As Heroes.

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That said, what of JR?

JR's work has been an admirable exercise in itself.

He is great fun.

A great thinker

Someone who acts not just talks about things.

Someone who does it himself not just hand it over to others
(last time I saw him, he was just back from a harsh trip into the Occupied Territories)

This is a great role model.

He has always been a lovely mentor to many, many people (as we heard at dinner last night).

Witty in that Cambridge / LSE / Liverpool way.

But above all, a person who believes that the only way to bridge Academia and Social Responsibility is by:

- struggling with it
- engaging in the process rather than theorising at a distance
- what in the North we'd call 'getting stuck in'

Thanks.