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Article:

Co-option, control and criticality: the politics of relevance regimes for the future of political science

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Abstract

Over the last 20 years the notion of relevance vis-à-vis political science became not only a subject of academic debates but also a domain of practice, largely due to the developments in the research funding, increasingly referred to as the 'impact agenda'. In this article, we explore how the growing focus on socio-economic impact as the assessment criterion of research funding shapes the discipline of political science itself - its knowledge production, dissemination and the emergent forms of accountability of political scientists. The article presents the results of a major international study that has examined the emergence of 'impact agendas' across 33 countries. We report on the changing idea of relevance of political science through the lens of its strategic ambiguity and historical evolution. We then explore these broader trends through an in-depth analysis of the UK as an 'extreme case' and a blueprint for funding system reforms. These developments, we argue, are not a mere funding policy innovation but rather a paradigmatic-level change, reshaping the position of political science in society as well as the types of scholarship that are possible and incentivised.

Introduction

"If politics is important, as no doubt we all believe (...), we cannot confine our message to ourselves and to the students in our departments....We must reach further" (2001, p. 3). With this encouragement to political scientists, Jean Blondel opened the first issue of *European Political Science* twenty years ago. Since then, the notion of 'the relevance of political science'

2

has become not only a subject of professional academic debate but also a domain of practice when it comes to *being* an *academic*, and arguably even a discrete zone or sub-field of intellectual scholarship and activity in its own right. This issue-expansion is itself a reflection of two inter-related pressures. The first – *internal* – pressure stems from a long-standing existential concern within political science regarding its social contribution beyond academe. The 'tragedy of political science' - to paraphrase David Ricci (1984) - was that it had become professionalised in a manner that increasingly moved the discipline away from practical politics or public engagement. This may, to some degree, explain the emergence of the second - *external* pressure of the new assessment, evaluation and audit frameworks that explicitly favoured research proposals that were likely to deliver some form of demonstrable public value. In short, political science became the subject of what is known as the 'impact agenda' (Smith et al., 2020).

The central element of this new agenda is the emergence of 'impact' as an assessment criterion – and consequently an incentive – of research funding. Research is increasingly assessed – both ex-ante in research applications and ex-post in evaluations in terms of its non-academic value to society. Examples of impact-related activities would therefore range from using research to cultivate a public debate to more applied and specific policy engagement; which has, in turn, stimulated an increasing focus on the co-design and co-production of research with potential research-users. In this article, we explore the emergence and role of the institutionalisation of 'impact' and its role in shaping the discipline of political science. As the socio-economic benefits of science become not only the strategic priority of research funders (Watermeyer, 2012), but also - and increasingly - a contributing element of interpretations of research 'excellence' *within* academia (Bandola-Gill 2019), the need to understand what might be termed 'the politics of relevance regimes for political science' becomes even greater. And yet there is a major gap in the existing research base: first, there is a lack of systematic

comparative scholarship on the emergence and institutionalisation of relevance regimes in different countries; second, there is a failure to fully acknowledge the risks and consequences that the focus on impact (see Flinders 2013) brings to political science in terms of co-option, control and criticality.

Although this article is focused on political science, many of the themes and topics, challenges and concerns are relevant across the social sciences, arts and humanities. The only slight caveat to this statement is that political science's traditional emphasis on the study and scrutiny of politicians, political institutions and political processes might arguably make concerns regarding co-option, control and criticality more acute in this disciplinary space. Furthermore, there is a long-established argument as to whether 'the impact agenda' should be viewed by political science as an opportunity for demonstrating the vitality and relevance of the discipline (see Flinders 2013; 2020a) or as little more than the raw imposition of neo-liberal logic and the commodification of knowledge (Slater 2012; Watermeyer 2019) and a risk to the quality of scholarship (Chubb and Reed 2018; for a review see Smith *et al.* 2020). And even though this 'Challenge or Opportunity?' debate is clearly relevant to the focus of this article, it is not our primary concern. Rather, our primary concern is focused on the international spread and variety of research relevance regimes in order to unpack the qualities of 'impact agendas' as they travel across the country settings.

Through rich empirical exploration of 33 country case studies, we untangle the ways in which notions of 'impact' are conceived, how they are measured and the institutional structures that are being put in place in order to incentivise and reward an increased focus on knowledge-utilisation. Impact, we argue, has been successful as a policy concept thanks to its *strategic ambiguity* (Jarzabkowski et al. 2010) – which allows for multiple interpretations at once and which travels well across different levels of higher education (from funders through boundary organisations to universities and research teams). As such, it accommodates a variety of

political and practical assumptions and (at least to a degree) allows for wide implementation despite the critique. Furthermore, as we show in this article, the formalisation of impact in the funding systems results in the increasing hybridisation of both science and policy/politics (Nowotny et al. 2001; Bandola-Gill 2019). This poses a particular challenge for political science scholarship as it risks over-emphasising a *demand*-side model of policy advice (cf. Sarewitz and Pielke 2007) in which knowledge is valued when it is directly responding to political signalling rather than *supplying* new and critical ideas (hence our emphasis on the risk of what might be termed 'co-option by stealth').

This article is divided into four inter-related sections. The first section explores the underlying rationale for the impact-agenda and very briefly sketches a shifting landscape in terms of new expectations and forms of assessment. Following on from this, the second section outlines the approaches and methods through which this shifting professional terrain was mapped and assessed in order to facilitate comparative analysis. The third and most substantive section presents and explores the research findings through a focus on *ambiguity*, *spread* and *extremes*, while also bringing the analysis up to the most recent developments and announcements. The fact that these latest governmental announcements focus attention on the manner in which mechanical forms of research evaluation risk stifling creativity and innovation provides a very direct link or connection between the empirical contribution of this article and its normative argument. As such, the final section returns to Noam Chomsky's classic work on the public responsibility of intellectuals in order to tease-out the specific risk to political science.

Sketching a shifting landscape

The established paradigm of public funding of science is based on the explicit expectation that research will lead to social and economic value beyond academia (Hessels et al. 2009; Jacob

2006). The reasons for the move towards impact measurement in the science funding system are multiple. Penfield et al. (2014) list four main motivations for the introduction of measurement of impact within higher education institutions (HEI): first, to monitor universities' performance; secondly, to establish accountability for public spending; thirdly, to inform funding decisions based on research's propensity for impact, and finally, to gain an understanding of the process of research dissemination and use. The changing regimes of knowledge production and the focus on increasing the social and political relevance of research have inevitably influenced the ways science is funded. Nowotny et al. (2001) famously discussed the "distinct shift from a 'culture of autonomy' to a 'culture of accountability'" in scientific institutions.

These changes towards accountability and transparency are not unique to science but rather are indicative of broader changes in public institutions. The move towards measuring impact could therefore be conceptualised in the context of broader changes in public services: in particular, the rise of New Public Management (NPM) and its focus on accountability, outcomes, performance measurement and new 'rituals of verification' (Power 1999; Sá, Kretz and Sigurdson 2013). In line with the work of Talib (2003), the impact agenda can be interpreted as the latest 'offspring' of NPM as applied to university systems in many advanced liberal democracies (following on from more quantitative forms of performance measurement such as rankings and league-table transparency requirements, performance-based funding, customer choice, etc.). These reforms are aimed not only at raising the quality of the performance of HEIs, but also at assessment and communication of the value of the public investment in publicly funded research (Sá et al. 2013). Therefore, performance assessment is increasingly becoming central to the governance of science (Cozzens and Turpin 2000), with the impact agenda being the latest domain in which the 'logic of the market' has been introduced (Berman 2012). As in other areas of NPM, impact replaces expert judgement and autonomy as a central

decision-making model in the performance measurement and managerialist approach to governance (Sá et al. 2013; Smith, Ward and House 2011). This brings the focus down to a micro-political focus on the commodification of knowledge. Indeed, if NPM brings with it a focus on the 'unbundling' (Pollitt and Talbot 2004) or 'unravelling' (Hooghe and Marks 2003) the state, the impact agenda as a NPM project brings with it an emphasis on 'unbundling' or 'unravelling' of scholarship into constituent components in order to apply some assessment of quality against which social and economic value can be attributed.

This important change in the research funding system (Whitley 2011) is not inconsequential, as the emergence of the new assessment system has changed the relations of authority and autonomy, as well as the system of existing incentives. As the work of leading scholars such as Andrew McGettigan (2013), Rob Watts (2017) and Stefan Collini (2017) has illustrated, this development creates tensions, as established cultures and pre-existing relationships are expected to move into alignment with the new expectations. The impact-agenda can therefore be theorised and understood through the lens of NPM as it fits with a broader set of concerns regarding managerialism, in general, and the emergence of a dominant political narrative that posits universities as 'anchor institutions' within a new and globalised knowledge economy. This is clearest in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia - where public research funding in higher education has been explicitly tied to the industrial strategy of each country and powerful 'incentives for impact' either introduced (UK) or are currently being implemented (Australia) (see Williams and Grant 2018). However, Australia and the UK have been viewed as 'innovators' *vis-à-vis* NPM for several decades and what's missing is a broader international account of how such trends are affecting a broader range of countries. The next section outlines our comparative methodology.

Tracing change

The research project employed a comparative methodology, exploring the systems of incentives for research impact across 33 European countries. The central access point (and funding) for this research was an EU-funded COST action – a networking initiative for political scientists from 38 EU countries. The data collection was designed as a multi-level process (summarised in Table 1), including qualitative country surveys, document analysis, two focus groups, and selected interviews with country representatives to fact-check and follow-up the written responses.

Insert here: <Table 1. Tracing Change in Research Relevance Regimes: A Four-Step Methodology>

The initial country survey was designed through a planning session that brought together network members from partner countries in September 2017. The survey was designed around the three research questions outlined in the Introduction and subsequently distributed to scholars in each of the 38 countries within the COST network. Detailed responses were received from 33 countries. These were then developed and supplemented through country-specific desk research that analysed a range of websites, resources and documents (e.g. guidelines for applicants, assessment protocols, science policy documents, etc.). Taken together, the survey data plus the desk research facilitated the creation of country profiles, which then provided the units of analysis for subsequent comparative study. Of the collected documents (over 100 in total), the survey responses were thematically coded, which facilitated the creation of a thematic matrix consisting of the following eight themes: (i) Incentives for Impact; (ii) Dominant Terms; (iii) Existing Definitions of Impact; (iv) Institutions Responsible for Impact Assessment; (v) Forms of Assessment; (vi) Measurement of Impact, (vii) Timeline

of Policy Changes, and (viii) Debate over Impact (for a review of the wider PROSEPS project see: Brans and Timmermans, forthcoming). These eight themes were then explored in-depth during two focus groups consisting of country representatives and convened in March and September 2018 (i.e. Steps 3 and 4, Table 1, above). Not only did this allow for the refinement of specific country profiles; it also facilitated a broad discussion of the emergent and potential concerns or implications of this agenda for political science in particular, and higher education more broadly. The focus group data were then coded thematically and the results of the two analytical stages (documents and focus groups) were contrasted and combined.

Mapping research regimes

In order to draw together the main insights and findings across these eight themes this section presents the research findings through a focus on (i) ambiguity, (ii) spread and (iii) extremes.

The Ambiguity of Impact

The key finding discussed in this article relates to the spread of impact as an element of the funding system in Europe - 31 of the 33 cases reported at least some scope of incentives for assessing research in terms of its broader socio-economic benefits. At the same time, the central quality of 'impact' was its definitional ambiguity, as the majority of countries reported that there was no single, official definition of impact in their research funding systems, or reported a broadly accepted, yet not formally codified definition. Significantly, only eight cases reported formally codified definitions of impact, in the form either of definitions (examples presented in Table 2) or of specific accounts of the effects of research in funding regulations (as was a case in Lithuania and Moldova). This points to the manner in which the notion of achieving

'impact' is very often used as a floating signifier – the word being clearer than the actual concept itself.

This ambiguity of 'relevance' as a funding paradigm was further expanded by the lack of consistency regarding the official terminology. Impact has been used by the study participants in different country settings interchangeably with 'valorisation' (Belgium, France), 'third mission of the universities' (Italy, Belgium), 'practicality' (Latvia), 'relevance of science' (Serbia, Luxembourg), 'knowledge exchange' (Hungary) or 'knowledge utilisation' (in the Netherlands). Some definitions discussed relationships with the 'socio-economic environment' (France), in terms of 'engagement or partnerships' with non-academic audiences (Poland, the Netherlands) or 'outreach' (Portugal). These debates over terminology veiled deeper concerns over the perceived ability of research to influence non-academic audiences, and also over the possibility of unwanted consequences of the formalisation of impact within research funding systems. In particular, there was a clear distinction between the definitions focusing on the process (for example of knowledge exchange, utilisation and engagement and partnerships) and ones focusing on the outcome (for example impact or socio-economic effects). There is a significant difference in the assumptions underlying these two types of definitions, in particular in the assumption of the relationship between research and its impact. The definitions focusing on the process reflected the role of science in policy and politics as a contributing factor to change rather than a sole element of this change. To the contrary, the definitions focusing on the outcome were underpinned by the logic of 'research use'. Consequently, these definitions placed the responsibility for change on research and were more reflecting the perspective on science-policy interface as a linear exchange.

This was evident in the focus group data where the participants critically reflected on the dominant terminology – not only the variety of terms used but also the malleability of the terms across the institutional setting. For example:

So my question is: which indicators do we look at? Do we consider science funders' definitions of impact? Which sometimes deviate from the definition of impact if it exists at an institution level or academic institution level, which sometimes have their own definitions of impact, and these definitions may also vary across institutions, where you get applied universities or classic universities. (FG4)

Despite this definitional ambiguity, the focus groups participants were broadly uniform in the perception that it is important for political science research to be relevant to the socio-economic environment and that political scientists should play an active role, for example through advisory activities or media presence. Many of the participants saw the emergent impact agendas as a chance for legitimising more applied fields and bridging the divisions between "cowboys who do applied research versus the real academics who stay away from it" (FG5) (reflecting this trend in other disciplines, see: Smith et al. 2020). However, the participants saw the risk with measuring impact and institutionalising it in funding systems. For example:

Impact in combination with incentives for impact is actually something that we would consider really dangerous and threatening to political science. (FG1)
And
Can I suggest that we make a distinction between different meanings of social relevance and impact as on the one hand, on the other hand, the idea that you can measure this, and the process of standardisation? It implies that you can leave that aside and you can focus on measuring it. The 'impact agenda' maybe has to do with the idea that you can measure it. (FG2)

Apart from the arguments relating to academic autonomy and freedom (akin to Watermeyer 2012), the focus group participants discussed the challenges with measuring impact of political science as it is shifting the responsibility for an outcome on academics when the actual use of knowledge is enacted by the non-academic actors. The participants called for a focus on process rather than output - they favoured knowledge mobilisation and knowledge transfer activities as they pointed out that the responsibility for use does not lie with the researcher. For example,

> I think for me personally the distinction would be that your social relevance, or the social relevance of your work, is sort of a 'potential'. But you don't really care whether it's actually utilised because that's the bit in your control. But to actually have an impact you would need to have your results used by other players in these policy debates or in politics. And I don't know if you can expect scientists to somehow deal with that. Whether their advice, their results will be actually taken up. (FG8)

The lack of formality of definitions of impact reflected in the analysed qualitative surveys and documents and the tensions over the definition of impact discussed by the focus group participants point to 'impact' being an example of what W. B. Gallie (1956) famously described as an 'essentially contested concept'. It appears bound to a loose set of values or principles but tends to lack any agreed core definition. To some extent, this is unsurprising as science policy concepts are often underdetermined in order to remain flexible and open for interpretation by both the science and the policy communities (Calvert 2006).

These issues of impact definition raise the question of the singularity of the impact agenda as a funding paradigm – in other words, are we observing an impact agenda or rather a variety of different impact agendas. The analysis of the collected data (including both codified and uncodified definitions) allows for the observation that, in fact, there is a common core in recent developments in the research impact agenda, embedded in the multiplicity of definitions.

As argued above, the definitions reflect a different underpinning assumptions regarding the science-policy interface, in particular the idea of research as *contributing* or *causing* change. However, regardless of the employed definitions of impact, the emerging research funding policies seemed to rest on common underlying assumptions of the responsiveness of science to political, social and economic change. For example, it is reflected in the conceptualisation of impact with reference to 'benefit' or changes to different social realms (such as the economy, society or culture) (see: Table 2). Practically, the existing definitions (or broader conceptualisations of impact) implicitly assume increased engagement between academics and research users and – consequently – an increasingly central role of the users of research (for example policymakers or legislators) in the research process, exercised either indirectly by influencing research priorities or directly by engaging in collaborative forms of research production. Therefore, the impact agenda implicitly defines the research process not as an autonomous domain of academics but as an essentially collaborative endeavour with research-users. The risk being that processes of knowledge-creation that lack any obvious patron in terms of a clear research-user community, or where questions might exist around secondary knowledge-mobilisation and utilisation processes, may fall prey to a process of devaluation that, in turn, stymies creativity, innovation and criticality.

<Insert here: Table 2. Definitions of Impact – Examples from the Database>

The Spread of Impact

Even though the definition of impact was at best inconsistent across the countries, its institutionalisation within the funding systems is increasingly becoming the reality for political

scientists across Europe. Interestingly, the introduction of impact as a criterion of research assessment was rarely associated with a single research policy and more commonly found its expression in a set of evolving, increasingly comprehensive guidelines which followed a similar trajectory. We have categorised the different approaches into five groups or, more precisely, into stages (Table 3, below).

<Insert here: Table 3. Mapping and Rating Research Relevance Regimes, 2020>

The direction of policy travel, viewed through the lens of Table 3, reflects a progressive *hardening* of formerly discretionary rules and a movement of the impact agenda from a strategic aim to a specific measure of research quality. The process was reflected by the focus group participants which reflected on the hardening of impact over time. The vast majority of focus group respondents suggested that the direction of development of the impact agenda in their countries follows the bottom-up trajectory, best exemplified by proposed reforms in Serbia and Sweden. Sweden, which currently uses mostly discretionary forms of assessment of the broader relevance of research (i.e. Stage 2 or 'high discretion'), is planning to implement a new research assessment strategy with a more formalised accounting structure around the non-academic social and economic benefits of science (i.e. Stage 4/5 – 'high demand). In 2020 the Swedish Research council has been conducting a pilot of a new evaluation approach, notably the discipline of political science was selected for this pilot (Swedish Research Council., 2020). Similarly, in Serbia, there is a planned reform aimed at focusing on relevance within grant funding (i.e. from Stage 2 to 3) (although grants have not been awarded in 10 years, see: Jarić Dauenhauer and Tatalović 2019). Furthermore, not a single country reported a reverse direction – for example reversing the direction of the impact agenda.

This move towards the hardening and institutional embedding of expectations to produce impact was reinforced by the responses of the universities to the changes in research policy environments. Here, the universities acted as translators of research policy into specific institutional practices, consequently changing the everyday work-life of political scientists. 'Impact' has been added to (at least some) universities' missions (see for example University of Oslo undated; RAND EUROPE 2015). In Romania (Universității Babeș-Bolyai 2016) and Belgium (KU Leuven, undated), universities increasingly offer funding for impact or community-oriented projects. The moves towards incentivising and evaluating impact have shaped the individual incentives available for academics. In Iceland, for example, academics can be rewarded with bonus payments each year for significant achievements in relation to non-academic impact (media work, public engagement, etc.).

The development of impact and 'hardening' of various impact measurement tools was driven by a variety of factors, both internal to the national setting and external. The three main factors highlighted in the surveys and focus groups were: 1.) an internal expansion of the performance measurement system in academia within the countries; 2.) European Research Council funding opportunities, in particular the Horizon 2020, and 3.) policy transfer – in particular of ideas from the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). The last one was particularly pronounced as the participants of the focus groups not only referred to the UK agenda but also acknowledged that the UK's approach is being closely followed by their country research funders or even copied within the funding system (for example in Italy and Norway). The paradox being that just as our research suggests that the UK's REF framework is being used as an international exemplar of 'best practice' leading to forms of institutional isomorphism in many countries, in the UK concerns about the unintended consequences of the REF have led the government to announce a fundamental review (discussed below). The next section drills-down into this case study in more detail.

An Extreme Relevance Regime?

It is widely recognised that the UK was a global innovator and influencer when it came to introducing a national research assessment regime (see Grant et al. 2010). The first exercise was undertaken when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister in 1986 and has since evolved through a series of acronyms and iterations with the latest, the REF, including an explicit focus on impact. The UK therefore provides a critical case for anyone seeking to understand the possible trajectory of future reforms across Europe (and beyond). This section explores the UK's case study in order to identify how the impact emerged and became formalised within the funding system but also the broader changes in the position of political science in the policy and politics resulted from the change in research funding. One of the key characteristics of the development of the impact agenda in the UK was its pace, spanning over 20 years (see Box 1, below). The initial motivation behind this project – as expressed in the 1993 White Paper *Realising Our Potential* was to clearly communicate the public value of science to key stakeholders, including the government and the public. As such, the subsequent policies were aimed at making the 'invisible visible' which, as famously argued by Marilyn Strathern (2000), is in itself a political act.

One significant aspect of the impact of agenda the UK is the scope of its institutionalisation within the broader infrastructure of research funding and practice. On the demand side, this process was supported by growing calls for 'evidence-based policymaking' as part of a broader modernisation agenda (Cabinet Office, 1999) which not only set the goalpost for the rationalisation of the policymaking process but also framed science as the key resource for decision-making (Smith, 2013). This new framing of the relationship between science and policy was then reflected in the supply-side changes aimed at forming the funding

and incentive systems of science to support this objective. The 'tipping point' of these changes was the first decade of the 2000s, particularly the era following the so-called Warry Report – 'Increasing the Economic Impact of Research Councils' - published in 2006. This report required the UK research councils to not only monitor research impact but also link it to the funding decisions - including an assessment of impact within the performance measurement exercises (which have been carried out in the UK since 1986) as well as an assessment of future impact within in the Pathways to Impact in the grant applications. And with this development, the UK became the first country which assessed both ex-ante and ex-post impact.

What followed the formalisation of impact as an assessment criterion was the rise of funding infrastructures incentivising the engagement between researchers and policymakers (other political actors) as well as growing know-how of such practices as knowledge mobilisation and exchange (Smith et al. 2020). In particular, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the key funder of social science in the UK, became an active actor in this process, including the funding of multiplicity of boundary organisations (or knowledge brokers – see: Bandola-Gill and Lyall 2017), including different forms of partnerships between researchers and user communities (ESRC, 2009). The most prominent example of this type of initiative is a 'What Works Network' (Cabinet Office, 2018) with 13 What Works Centres and affiliate centres covering such topics as education, crime, health, wellbeing or homelessness.

Furthermore, the changes in the funding and assessment lead to institutionalisation of impact within the universities which now became materially involved in supporting engagement between academics and their broader environments. On the local scale, this change was reflected in the university strategies and dedicated teams and office responsible for supporting and documenting the impact work (Smith et al. 2020). On the national level, universities formalised collaborations in this area and sought to invest in new boundary-spanning research structures. The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), for

example, was created in 2018 as a network for university-based policy-focused research centres and a dedicated contact point – 'a one-stop-shop' - for practitioners and research-users who wished to explore new collaborations. Originally established as an informal network by a handful of universities its creation was driven by an increasing recognition amongst HEIs that the impact agenda demanded flexible new structures and greater capacity in three main areas: (i) providing a focal point for policymakers and universities to have a dialogue, build links and share opportunities; (ii) creating opportunities for university knowledge mobilisers to network, share best practice and collaborate; and (iii) demonstrating the value of academic research by facilitating the mobility of people, ideas and talent. Within two years UPEN had grown to enjoy a national profile with over eighty members, a small secretariat and close working relationships with the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, the Government Office for Science with the majority of Whitehall departments and a growing visibility and role at the international and sub-national level.[1]

<Insert Box 1: The Evolution of Incentives for Impact in the United Kingdom, 1993-2020>

What UPEN arguably provides is just one example of what Bandola-Gill (2019) has described as the increasing hybridisation of the British political science where the boundaries between science and policy are increasingly blurred. Engagement with non-academic actors emerged as not only increasingly legitimate but also incentivised practice, accounted for in recruitment processes, career progression criteria and national prizes (RAND, 2015). This leads to the evolution of the role of political scientists as shaped by the expectation to not only produce knowledge but also to actively engage in the process of translating it into policy-relevant

knowledge and increasing professionalization of knowledge exchange in higher education. In many ways this is exactly the story set out in Box 1 with its account of the introduction of soft-signalling around impact in the mid-to-late 1990s followed by a rapid escalation of the research relevance regime through the stages set out in Table 3 (above). In recent years the impact agenda became the focus of increasing concerns about the unintended consequences on academic research in the UK. REF impact has become a subject of wide debates, with arguments regarding the lack or theoretical underpinning of 'impact' (Boswell and Smith, 2017), problems with measurement (MacDonald 2017), gaming (Watermeyer 2014) and ethics of impact (Smith and Stewart 2017) as well as growing workloads of academics (Smith et al. 2020).

In response to these concerns, the government made two major policy announcements in the Autumn of 2020. The first of these came with the publication of a joint policy paper by the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy entitled '*Reducing Bureaucratic Burden in Research, Innovation and Higher Education*' (2020) which stated,

> We have been concerned by a major growth in bureaucracy over recent decades, which became particularly apparent for the R&D system during the pandemic, much of which has added limited value or in some cases led to negative behaviours or consequences. Too often administrative activities are a distraction from the core purpose of research and education providers.

To some extent this focus on bureaucracy and efficiency was driven by the need to increase economic efficiencies in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. But it was also rooted in increasing pre-pandemic concern regarding the existence of a toxic research culture in the UK, a concern that had been laid bare in the Wellcome Trust's January 2020 report, '*What researchers think about the Culture they work in'.* Based on findings emanating from an extensive literature

review, 94 qualitative interviews, four workshops and a major national online survey the report concluded that what a large number of researchers thought about 'the research culture they worked' in could be summarised as follows.

> They say that conditions are being worsened by a complex network of incentives from government, funders and institutions that seem to focus on quantity of outputs, and narrow concepts of 'impact', rather than on real quality. The upshot is that they feel intense pressure to publish, with too little value placed on how results are achieved and the human costs. They accept competition as a necessary part of working in research, but think that it is often becoming aggressive and harmful (Wellcome Trust 2020: 3).

In October 2020 the Minister for Science, Amanda Solloway (2020), gave a speech on the relationship between incentives and impact:

> Through linking evaluation to funding, we have introduced policies intended to drive greater impact and openness from our research. That's why in all honesty other countries look to the UK as the global experts in research evaluation – with nations as far-flung as Japan and Australia running exercises that are inspired by or benchmarked against our own Research Excellence Framework.'

This is clearly an argument that chimes with the research on relevance regimes set out in this article and summarised in Tables 2 and 3 (above). The government had therefore decided to start working on a plan to reform the REF after the current 2021 exercise is complete. The developments shown in this section indicate the value of the ambiguity and malleability of 'impact' discussed in previous sections. Research impact agenda in the UK is an ever-changing process in which 'impact' is evolving and spreading into increasingly new political and institutional domains. In the following section we explore the risks and consequences of this multifaceted process for political science.

The future of political science?

Twenty years ago *European Political Science* was launched with the first edition containing a powerful plea by Jean Blondel (2001, p. 3) for scholars to take the findings and arguments of the field beyond the seminar room and lecture theatre. "We must reach further" - Blondel argued and this article has presented the first comparative mapping of the spread of impact agendas around Europe. The 'meta-governance' of higher education has changed with the state playing a far more active and directive role *vis-à-vis* the traditional academic cultures and practices. In this section, we return back to the question of the future of political science, seen through the lens of its relevance. And indeed the two are closely connected, as Harold Lasswell in *The Future of Political Science* (1963 [2005ed]: xx) argued: "In some bodies politic the formidable potentialities of freedom to research, teach and publish are so well understood by the political elite that every effort has been made to commandeer political science as a tool of the Establishment". With this warning in mind, we suggest that the recent emergence of research relevance in a growing number of countries (Smith et al., 2020) should be interpreted as threats to criticality of political science (i.e. as tools of co-option) due to the manner in which it is *state-directed* forms of relevance and impact that are now imbued within definitions of research excellence. A paradigmatic and highly political shift in the meta-governance of the academy is occurring and it might reasonably be thought that political science might sit at the vanguard in terms of seeking to politicise this agenda.

Exactly how this shift is being implemented varies from country to country and involves a range of tools or mechanisms (Table 1.2, above) and this article has revealed how the traditional 'arm' in the 'arm's-length relationship' between academe and the state has been reduced significantly due to this agenda. One of the key reference points for understanding the democratic and political significance of academe, in general, and political science, more

specifically, is Noam Chomsky's *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* (1967[2017ed]: 16-17)
and his argument that:

> Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze
> actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the
> Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty,
> from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged
> minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training
> to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation,
> ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are
> presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than
> what Macdonald calls the 'responsibility of people,' given the unique privileges
> that intellectuals enjoy.

Chomsky offers an important distinction between two types of intellectual. The first group
were the *value-orientated intellectuals* who were concerned with the realm of ideas,
challenging dominant ideological frameworks and who placed contemporary issues in a
historical context. These were the dangerous creatures with the honesty to tell it as it is that
was itself institutionally facilitated by the permanence and protection of tenure. The second
group were the *technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals* that focused their energies on
refining and tinkering with the existing system and could therefore be trusted as 'responsible
men.' These were the academic experts that fell into place, passively adopting the conventions
instituted by the structures of authority carrying out "faithfully the instructions of those who
hold the reins of power, to be loyal and faithful servants, not after reflective judgement but by
reflexive conformism"

The risk is that the emergence of an increasingly precarious professoriate in which tenure-protection is shrinking combined with the growth of the impact agenda risks subverting the roles of political scientists only as responsive to policymakers' needs. There is a growing body of evidence showing the risks of the impact agenda, including the risk of homogenising political research and limiting the theory-driven or critical research (Smith et al. 2020). In the UK, to return to our 'critical case', 'The Real Time REF Review' (Weinstein et al. 2019) published in June 2019 found that academic staff were increasingly being steered towards the study of research topics that were most likely to deliver demonstrable short-term impact rather than being encouraged to follow their intellectual curiosity.

This 'squeezing of intellectual spaces' (Smith 2010) matters due to the manner in which it chimes with Lasswell's argument about political science needing to avoid being 'commandeered' by political elites, and Chomsky's on the decline of value-oriented intellectuals and increasing preference for *technocratic and policy-orientated* (and therefore to some extent depoliticised) modes of inquiry. It is at this point that Richard Watermeyer's *Competitive Accountability in Academic Life* (2019) provides a useful contemporary reference point due to the manner in which it resonates with this section's concern that the introduction of research relevance regimes could become a stealth-like form of co-option. This article has revealed the international spread and embedding of this risk. This is not in any way a rejection of Blondel's original entreaty for political science to 'reach further' but simply a warning that the future health of the discipline is likely to depend on its ability to take control of the impact agenda and to 'reach out' in its own terms and far beyond the narrow direction of the state.

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