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DEBATE

Impotence Through Relevance? Faustian Bargains, Beyond Impact and the Future of Political Science

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Abstract

The relationship between academe and society is shifting. Academics are increasingly expected to work through forms of co-design and co-production with potential research-users to address state-selected societal challenges and produce evidence of "impact". The risk, however, is that this shift incentivises a form of Faustian bargain whereby scholars trade-down their traditional criticality and independence as the price they pay for access to large funding streams and to be demonstrably "impactful". The "impotence through relevance" thesis seeks to capture this paradoxical possibility: those scholars hailed as most relevant – the "high-impact" academic superheroes – may in fact be almost completely irrelevant; while the most relevant scholars in terms of truly transformative socio-political potential are dismissed and set aside as unproductive and therefore of little value. The "impotence through relevance" argument raises distinctive questions about co-option and control, democracy and decline. These are particularly significant for political science.

KEYWORDS

Co-option, Impact, Incentives, Relevance, State

Zusammenfassung

Die Beziehung zwischen Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft verändert sich. Von WissenschaftlerInnen wird zunehmend erwartet, dass sie mit potenziellen Forschungsnutzenden zusammenarbeiten, um staatlich ausgewählte gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen anzugehen und die „Wirkung" ihrer Forschung zu beweisen. Es besteht jedoch das Risiko, dass dieser Wandel eine Art „faustischen Pakt" befördert, bei dem WissenschaftlerInnen ihre traditionelle

Kritikfähigkeit und Unabhängigkeit gegen Zugang zu großen Finanzierungsströmen und ihre nachweisliche „Wirkung“ eintauschen. Die These „Impotenz durch Relevanz“ erfasst diese paradoxe Möglichkeit: Die als am relevantesten gepriesenen WissenschaftlerInnen – die „wirkungsstarken“ akademischen Superhelden – können in Wirklichkeit fast völlig irrelevant sein; während die relevantesten WissenschaftlerInnen im Hinblick auf ihr wirklich transformatives soziopolitisches Potenzial, ihre Produktivität und damit ihren Wert abgetan werden. Das Argument „Impotenz durch Relevanz“ wirft deutliche Fragen zu Kooptierung und Kontrolle, Demokratie und Niedergang auf. Diese sind für die Politikwissenschaft von besonderer Bedeutung.

Résumé

La relation entre le monde universitaire et la société évolue. On attend de plus en plus des universitaires qu'ils travaillent par le biais de formes de co-conception et de coproduction avec des utilisateurs potentiels de la recherche pour relever les défis sociétaux sélectionnés par l'État et produire des preuves de leur « impact ». Le risque, cependant, est que ce changement encourage une forme de marchandage faustien dans lequel les chercheurs sacrifient leur criticité et leur indépendance traditionnelles comme prix à payer pour accéder à d'importants flux de financement et pour avoir un « impact » manifeste. La thèse de « l'impuissance par la pertinence » cherche à saisir ce paradoxe: les chercheurs salués comme les plus pertinents – les super-héros universitaires « à fort impact » – pourraient en fait être presque insignifiants; tandis que les chercheurs les plus pertinents en termes de potentiel sociopolitique véritablement transformateur sont rejetés et mis de côté comme improductifs et donc de peu de valeur. L'argument de « l'impuissance par la pertinence » soulève des questions distinctes sur la cooptation et le contrôle, la démocratie et le déclin. Celles-ci sont particulièrement importantes pour la science politique.

Riassunto

Il rapporto tra mondo accademico e società sta cambiando. Ci si aspetta sempre più che gli accademici lavorino attraverso forme di co-progettazione e co-produzione con potenziali utenti della ricerca per affrontare le sfide sociali selezionate dallo stato e produrre prove di “impatto”. Il rischio, tuttavia, è che questo cambiamento incentivi una forma di patto faustiano in cui i ricercatori e le ricercatrici barattano la loro tradizionale criticità e indipendenza come prezzo da pagare per l’accesso a fondi importanti e per poter dire che la loro ricerca ha chiaramente un “impatto”. La tesi dell’articolo è denominata “impotence

through relevance" e cerca di catturare la possibilità del seguente paradosso: i ricercatori acclamati come più rilevanti – i supereroi accademici "ad alto impatto" – potrebbero in realtà essere quasi del tutto irrilevanti; mentre le ricercatrici più rilevanti in termini di potenziale socio-politico realmente trasformativo vengono respinte e accantonate come improduttive e quindi di scarso valore. La tesi solleva importanti questioni (cooptazione e controllo, democrazia e declino) che sono particolarmente significative per le scienze politiche.

INTRODUCTION

What is the role of political science in society? How is that role changing, notably in relation to the reach of the state and the nature of democracy? Why might those changes matter in terms of scholarly standards and societal impact? How does the discipline conceptualise the "politics of" political science and what practical form might this conceptualisation take? These are "big" questions but they are not simply "academic" questions.

In a post-Covid context with increasing evidence of democratic "backsliding" and "decay" in many parts of the world the professional responsibilities of political scientists to the public in terms of nurturing democratic values, supporting policy and speaking "truth to power" has arguably never been greater. At the same time the research landscape has in recent years shifted towards an emphasis on the value of different forms of knowledge, and an awareness of the value of bringing potential research-users into the research process. The former element is reflected in a rhetorical shift away from talking specifically about "universities" or "higher education" to a focus on connective and catalysing capacities within a broader research, development and innovation "ecosystem"; the latter element reflected in an increasing methodological emphasis amongst funders towards supporting forms of co-design, co-production and co-delivery in research processes. The boundaries between knowledge-creation and knowledge-mobilisation – and between researchers and research-users – are therefore increasingly fluid and opaque. The "engaged scholar" (Hoffman, 2021) is expected to work across the nexus or inter-section between research and policy. In an increasing range of countries these engagement expectations have been formalised not only through the introduction of external audit-assessments and hypothecated research funding but also through the introduction of a variety of "incentives for impact". This might explain why Marleen Brans and Arco Timmerman's (2022) major comparative analysis found that no less than 80% of political scientists in Europe were active policy advisors.

The "main drift", as C. Wright Mills (1959) might have labelled it, of political science in the twenty-first century has therefore involved a gradual closing of the traditional gap between science and society, and the aim of this article is to dissect, challenge, and (re) politicise this process. Its central argument is that in order to fulfil its societal role political science needs to retain a degree of healthy distance and independence from the state for the simple reason that distance facilitates not only scientific perspective but also ensures a degree of democratic criticality. It was for exactly this reason that public research funding has traditionally been distributed through arm's-length agencies which enjoyed a high degree of independence from elected politicians. Arguments concerning the independence and autonomy of academics have, of course, existed for centuries. Traditional debates about the "decline of donnish dominion" - A. H. Halsey's (1992) phrase – have, however, been replaced in recent decades by far shaper concerns about the "tyranny of relevance"

(Flinders, 2013) as political scientists are increasingly expected to demonstrate their social impact and public value.

The central contextual claim of this article is that *the political dimensions* of this recalibration of the science-society relationship remain under-studied, under-theorised and generally under-acknowledged. The fact that political science has generally been relatively silent on such matters could be interpreted as evidence of exactly those risks and concerns regarding democracy, decline and deference that this article seeks to highlight. As the expectations of engagement and the incentives for impact increase, as is likely to occur, so too does the risk that traditionally critical disciplines or perspectives will be either *co-opted into the state* or squeezed out of academe. To make such an argument is not to look back to some Newman'esque "idea of a university" ([1852] 1996) with its ivory towers and wandering dons. Nor does it see engagement as necessarily involving a decline in criticality (cf. Van Ostaijen & Jhagroe, 2022). But as the pressures and particularly precarity surrounding academe increase so too does the risk that scholars may be tempted to engage in a form of Faustian bargain whereby criticality and independence are effectively traded as the access-price to state-selected research funding streams and collaborative opportunities with potential research-users.

As such, co-option, deference and decline may become a very real risk for political science. The more "relevant" or "impactful" a political scientist (or any scholar) is hailed for being against instrumental state-based definitions and audit process, the less influential and challenging they might be from a more fundamental and critical perspective. This risk is captured in the notion of *impotence through relevance*. The irony this argument brings to long-standing debates and concerns about disciplinary impact and social value is the suggestion that: *those scholars who currently appear to be most relevant may in fact be most irrelevant*.

This is intended to be a strong and provocative argument. The fact that it is made by a former national 'Impact Champion' as selected by the United Kingdom's main funder of social scientific research hopefully underlines both the honesty and potential gravity of the challenge being presented. There are, of course, several caveats that must be acknowledged before developing this thesis about 'the irrelevance of the relevant'. First, the focus of this article is on research-related impacts and there is, of course, a strong argument to be made that by educating future generations on (*inter alia*) the existence of inequalities, the distribution of power, and the scale of societal challenges it is teaching that forms *the* major impact of professional political scientists on society. It is, however, possible to make and accept this argument while also recognizing that (i) what makes university-level teaching special is that it is generally research-led and therefore that (ii) shifts in the hidden politics of the research funding system are likely at some point to ripple through into teaching.

Secondly, there are many 'pathways to impact' that political scientists can take - such as working with the media or with non-governmental organisations, hosting podcasts or working in think tanks – and these all play a role in disseminating academic insights across and into society. And yet there is also great value in working *directly* with politicians and senior state officials for the simple reason that they occupy positions of power and have access to resources (financial, legal, structural, etc.) that can deliver real change. As this article illustrates, it is politicians and their officials who increasingly define the parameters of research funding, and working with government is generally seen as the 'gold standard' when it comes to impact case studies for national research assessments. Third and finally, the tensions and tribulations highlighted in this article create questions about career paths, avoiding pitfalls and balancing instrumental incentives with professional values and norms. Although important these career questions are beyond the scope of this article.[1] What this article does offer is a thesis about the risk of co-option and control and it is with teasing-apart and providing an intellectual

[1]But for a discussion and coping strategies see Flinders (2013); Flinders and Pal (2020).

framework that allows this thesis to be discussed and debated that this article is principally concerned.

This article is divided into four sections. The opening section provides historical context and suggests that the social and political sciences have always suffered from an existential concern about their societal role, and that it is this internal ambivalence which is in some ways responsible for the external imposition of incentives for impact. The second section develops this argument through a brief account of the changing international context. This matters because the increasing "shadow of the state" (Eisfeld & Flinders, 2021) may tempt political scientists into exactly that form of Faustian bargain that this article seeks to expose and warn against. The suggestion being that *impotence through relevance* is a very real threat to both the future of political science as a critical social science, and potentially to the discipline's broader capacity to play a role in "mending democracy" (Hendriks et al., 2019). The opportunity this thesis reveals is for political science to take the lead in forging a broader understanding of *different types of impact* than has generally been adopted within state-based national audit systems, and a *reconceptualization of relevance* as including modes of critical thinking that do reach beyond academe and into society (the focus of part three). The fourth and final section therefore concludes with the suggestion that the impact agenda represents *both a threat and an opportunity* for political science. Innovation and awareness will ensure success, but continued drift towards simple compliance with political-selected and state-led audit frameworks or pure disengagement is likely to result in an even greater tragedy for political science (see Ricci, 1984).

DISCIPLINARY ANGST

The central argument of this article is that the contemporary pressure on political scientists to demonstrate their non-academic value to society risks creating a situation whereby (hyper) activity in relation to relevance could actually veil a situation of almost total irrelevance. The argument of this section is simply that political science has always tended to be divided between those who feel it should operate as a more engaged discipline working to solve societal challenges, on the one hand, as opposed to those who sought to promote a more detached, independent and "scientific" stance, on the other. The history of political science (and several other social sciences) can therefore be traced through the ebb-and-flow of debates concerning the responsibility of academics *to* society. In terms of disciplinary origins it is important to recognise that political science evolved out of a commitment not to science *per se* but to public service. The scientific study of government (broadly defined) would, it was suggested, enhance the design and delivery of public services in ways that would be of demonstrable value to society: "[to] discover…what government can properly and successfully do…with the utmost possible efficiency" (Wilson, 1887, p. 197).

As the twentieth century progressed, and especially in the wake of the Second World War, a process of professionalisation within the social and political sciences occurred which embraced a very technocratic, positivist and often behaviouralist position (i.e. "value free social science") that militated against active involvement in society. This was the "main drift" that C. Wright Mills critiqued with a mixture of passion and venom in *The Sociological Imagination*, and which Bernard Crick rallied against in his *The American Study of Politics* (both 1959). From the late 1960s onwards a number of "dissident" professional associations were established – Association for Critical Sociology, Radical Geography, Union of Radical Political Economics (all in 1969), Radical Philosophy Association in 1972, Critical Anthropology in 1974 (see Barrow, 2022) – with the Caucus for a New Political Science (1967) leading the way but the overall impact of these "dissident associations" was arguably limited. In political science the emergence of the Perestroika movement in 2000 reflected this lack of progress and brought

with it a renewed emphasis on methodological pluralism and public relevance (see Renwick Monroe, 2005). The "public sociology wars" and "post-autistic economics movement" showed that political science was not alone in possessing a significant degree of intellectual angst about its evolution and direction. A seam of post-millennium scholarship – including Bent Flyvberg's *Making Social Science Matter* (2001), Sanford Schram and Brian Caterino's *Making Political Science Matter* (2006), Ian Shapiro's *The Flight from Reality* (2009) and Guy Peters, Jon Pierre and Gerry Stoker's *The Relevance of Political Science* (2015) – all reflected a deep sense of professional concern. It is at this point possible to make a link back to Cardinal Newman's lectures on the role of the modern university. Newman suggested that a university's "soul" lies in the mark it leaves on students; whereas for political science it is possible to look into its origins and suggest that its "soul" lies on the mark is leaves on society.

This is an argument that resonates with Samuel Huntington's (1988) belief that political science should be committed to both knowledge-creation and the societal application of that knowledge. Gabriel Almond (1988) would later explore this linkage and come to the conclusion that, "the uneasiness in the political science profession is not of the body but *of the soul*" [emphasis added] (p. 829). The various schools and sects within political science possessed their own conception of "proper" political science which had at its core a very different view about how the discipline should demonstrate its relevance (developed in Almond, 1989). Two decades later John Trent (2011) would survey the available evidence on the strengths and weaknesses of political science and conclude with the basic and rather stark impression that it is "a discipline in search of its soul and out of touch with the real world of politics" (p. 197). But this intellectual history is as well-known as it is well-documented (e.g. Collini, 1983; Ricci, 1984; Seidelman, 1985; Janos, 1986) and for the purposes of this article it is simply provided as a foundation on which to make three arguments.

Firstly, debates concerning societal relevance, policy impact and public value have always existed within political science. Secondly, the underpinning rationale for different "schools and sects" within the discipline is itself very often based on claims to social relevance. This is an important point. The behavioural revolution was itself designed to respond to concerns that political science had become increasingly irrelevant. David Easton's arguments in *The Political System* (1953) concerning "the decline of modern political theory" and the "malaise" of political science, David Truman's sweeping critique in his *Impact of the Revolution in Behavioural Science on Political Science* (1955) on the alleged failure of the discipline to keep pace with the other social sciences, and Robert Dahl's *Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest* (1961) were each in their own ways crafted with an emphasis on the need for political science to demonstrate a more ambitious and explicit social relevance. Political science evolved as "a discipline divided" – to use Almond's (1989) description – on the basis of an almost fundamental disagreement about what being "relevant" meant and how it could best be achieved. The third argument is that for several reasons the "push" factors emanating out of political science in favour of engaged scholarship remained weak. By far the most astute review and analysis of this situation is provided by David Ricci's excellent but generally overlooked 1984 book, *The Tragedy of Political Science*. The main argument of this section is that debates about non-academic impact and relevance have existed at the core of political science since its earliest formation as a self-standing discipline. This is an argument that would place its roots in Woodrow Wilson's 1887 article on "The Study of Administration" in *Political Science Quarterly* with its emphasis on the role of the discipline to "discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and, secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost either of money or of energy" (p. 197). It is also an argument that resonates with the Perestroika movement within political science during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This is not to suggest that the latter were arguing in favour of a Wilsonian model of service-orientated public administration, but it is to suggest a shared emphasis on the

active role of political science in society. The next section reviews the external imposition of incentives for impact as a driver of cultural and behavioural change.

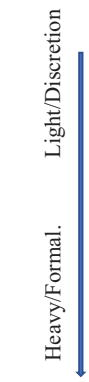
INCENTIVES FOR IMPACT

The previous section provided a very brief history of political science. Critics might suggest that it provided a rather Americanised view of the discipline and to some extent that is correct. Nevertheless, longstanding debates concerning relevance, impact and social value are also to be found within European political science and British political studies (see Flinders & Pal, 2020). The framing of this second section revolves around "push" and "pull" factors. Its argument is that the disciplinary angst observable within political science was not a core factor in the emergence of the contemporary "impact agenda". It was the societal context that shifted in ways that placed new expectations on academics and demanded an increased disciplinary emphasis on non-academic social impact. Around the world political science, like all disciplines, is increasingly required to demonstrate its relevance. The paradox this article seeks to explore is that the more relevant political science tries to become the more impotent and irrelevant it might be. This section charts the emergence of academic impact regimes as a global trend. It makes five arguments:

1. It is possible to identify a rapid and still unfolding shift towards "impact assessment" regimes.
2. The United Kingdom was an "early innovator" and many of its frameworks, insights and assumptions are now being replicated in different countries through processes of policy transfer.
3. A high degree of contestation and "strategic ambiguity" tends to surround the definition of impact and its measurement, with different countries adopting different approaches.
4. Achieving non-academic societal impact is increasingly seen as not separate to but a component element of "research excellence".
5. The impact agenda is increasingly complemented by a shift towards prioritising the funding of projects that are co-designed and co-produced with non-academic research-users.

Taken together these five arguments focus attention on (i) the increasing "shadow of the state" in terms of *politically-selected* rather than *scholar-selected* research priorities (discussed below), and (ii) the creation of incentives that might serve to co-opt political science into established policy frameworks in ways that undermine independence and criticality (thereby relating to the core *impotence through relevance* thesis this article seeks to explore). Taking each of these arguments in turn, Bandola-Gill and her colleagues (2021) have provided the first graded comparative mapping of impact assessment regimes covering 33 countries (see Table 1, below). What this review reveals is not only the emergence of an international trend towards impact assessment regimes but also the role of the United Kingdom as an "impact innovator" vis-à-vis research that has then helped inform and shape similar initiatives around the world. From 2023, for example, each Japanese national university will be required to produce a form of impact case study in a process that has been explicitly shaped by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK. What Table 1 veils, however, is the existence of significant ambiguity in relation to exactly how *non-academic* impact is defined and measured, which, in itself, reflects a range of complex *theoretical, practical* and *institutional* challenges. In the Netherlands, for example, the debate tends to focus on "knowledge utilization" and "valorisation"; whereas in Italy the focus is on "knowledge transfer" and "exploitation", and in Luxembourg the dominant framing revolves around "target groups" or "beneficiaries".

TABLE 1 Incentives for impact: A cross-national comparison.

Stage	Regime Characteristics	Countries	Evolution of Policy Emphasis
1	No emphasis on impact	Austria, Switzerland	
2	Clear prioritisation of social and economic impacts of research in setting and elaboration of government strategies.	Montenegro, Bulgaria, Denmark, Sweden, Croatia, Serbia	
3	As #2 but these statements translated down into specific impact-focused research funding opportunities.	Belgium, Poland, North Macedonia	
4	As #3 but (ex ante) responsibility for impact related targets shifted down the policy chain to funding organisations and grant recipients (i.e. prospective 'pathways to impact' statements').	Finland, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Luxembourg, Hungary, Ireland, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Estonia	
5	As #4 plus introduction of ex post impact assessment as part of the performance measurement embedded in the funding system (i.e. 'Impact Case Studies').	Latvia, Netherlands, France, Italy Moldova, UK, Romania, Lithuania. Norway, Slovakia, Iceland, Greece, Poland.	

Source: Adapted from Bandola-Gill et al., 2021.

The use of different framings, words and language very often reveals the existence of subtle differences in how the tone and texture of impact is conceived in a particular country. From this perspective the UK has been interpreted as a particularly mature, developed and even "extreme" example of an impact regime. It also provides a "critical case" for analysts who want to understand the challenges of non-academic impact assessment, in general, and policy-related impact, in particular. In the UK a "dual approach" exists: core underpinning research funding is distributed by a formula to universities based upon their performance in the REF; while academics applying for project-specific funding from research funders must also outline the project's non-academic societal value and how this will be delivered. The REF process is broadly quinquennial and requires that discipline-level "units" (i.e. generally departments) submit not only a selection of outputs (i.e. research publications) in order to demonstrate the quality of their work but also a number of "impact case studies" in the form of relatively short narrative statements which seek to demonstrate the non-academic impact on society of the research conducted within that unit.[2] For REF impact is defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia". In the 2021 REF non-academic "impact" was worth 25% of a unit's overall score, up from 20% in REF2014. As a result, "impactology" has become something of a new science and professional domain in the UK with political scientists generally attempting to demonstrate their impact on public policy (see Brans & Timmermans, 2022).

As Table 1 illustrates, the introduction of impact regimes has become a global trend, albeit with some national variation. What is interesting but rarely acknowledged is how dominant definitions of "research excellence" have absorbed and now reinforce a clear non-academic societal element. To some extent this symbiosis dovetails with long-standing intellectual questions regarding (*inter alia*) knowledge production, research utilization, brokerage and

[2]The Impact Case Studies are available on line. For REF2014 see https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/. For REF2021 see https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact.

"the art of translation". It also produces fundamental questions concerning autonomy, accountability, control and a basic question about "*what are universities for*?" (Collini, 2012). This is reflected in a raft of critical books with titles such as *Rank Hypocrisies* (Sayer, 2015), *Universities at War* (Docherty, 2015), and *Competitive Accountability in Academic Life* (Watermeyer, 2019) that generally link the emergence of the impact agenda with the marketisation of academe and the commodification of knowledge. But what has been missing, or at the very least has remained under-developed, has been any attempt to highlight the political or democratic challenges created by the impact agenda, especially in relation to the discipline of political science. Multiple challenges have been identified. Smith et al. (2020), for example, highlight the *theoretical, practical* and *institutional* challenges of the impact agenda; Cairney and Oliver (2020) stress *ethical, personal* and *practical* dilemmas. Other studies have highlighted issues relating to independence and criticality and therefore resonate with the "impotence through relevance" thesis this article seeks to develop. Oliver, Kothari and Mays (2019), for example, highlight the risk to "researcher independence and credibility" and that "researchers may be pressed to frame findings in particular ways" as component elements of the "dark side of co-production" (p. 4); Smith and Stewart (2017) raise a potential "squeeze on critical thinking" (p. 121); while Crouzat et al. (2018) point to the co-option of scholars to "add legitimacy to a [pre-determined] policy position" (see also Davey Smith et al., 2021; Warren & Garthwaite, 2015).

What then does this article add to the debate, discussion and analytical toolkit?

First and foremost, it combines these often obliquely presented concerns into a focused discussion of the *political challenges* posed by the impact agenda. Secondly, it looks "beyond the impact agenda" and highlights two additional shifts in the funding landscape that have generally been overlooked (the focus of the next section). Thirdly, it provides an analytical framework (in part three, below) through which the "impotence through relevance" hypothesis can be not only illustrated and challenged, but also used as a way of driving positive change within and beyond the discipline. Fourthly, it underlines why the existence of a Faustian bargain that could deliver significant professional riches (grant income, tenure, promotion, prizes, esteem, etc.) is particularly pathological for political science (part four).

CO-PRODUCTION AND STATE-SELECTED FUNDING

As the opening section of this article illustrated, political science has always been a "divided discipline" – to paraphrase Almond (1989) – and to a large extent this schism has always rested on the existence of competing views as to the degree to which it should aspire to be either an objective, depoliticised and "scientific" field of inquiry untainted by active engagement in practical politics, or an engaged discipline whereby its insights were used to support policy and may even sustain forms of academic activism. This long-running and largely internal debate has in recent years been redefined and recast by the emergence of externally imposed audit regimes which explicitly assess the non-academic value of publicly funded research (see Table 1, above). And yet to focus on the introduction of "impact regimes" risks missing two other critical shifts in the emergent research funding landscape which each in their own ways fit within the "impotence through relevance" thesis due to the manner in which they create new incentives for academics. The first of these is an *increasing preference amongst research funders to promote forms of co-production and co-design* (for a review see Heath & Mormina, 2022); the second is a shift in resources *from scholar-selected research topics towards politically-mandated and state-directed forms of funding* (for a review see Eisfeld & Flinders, 2021). The argument being that any analysis of "the politics of impact" for political science – or any other discipline – must look beyond "end-point" assessment systems and to how funding is increasingly distributed in terms of *focus* and *process*.

Once again, the UK provides a critical case. There is, of course, a certain ambiguity in this designation and the argument here: although the UK is an outlier in the sense of being an early and arguably aggressive innovator in relation to the external evaluation of non-academic research impact, it is at the same time emblematic of a far broader international shift (as Table 1 illustrates, above) towards redefining the role and relationship between academe and society. As such, the UKRI strategic plan for 2022–2027 – *Transforming Tomorrow Together* – is indicative of this shift with its focus on five strategic themes alongside an emphasis on the co-funding of projects and the co-creation of research agendas. More broadly, an emphasis on the research and innovation "ecosystem" discursively creates a more collaborative endeavour in which funding will follow and incentivise partnerships across traditional disciplinary, professional and organisational boundaries (hence an increasing focus on porosity, absorption and braided careers). What this means for political scientists is that research funding opportunities will increasingly depend on the existence of close and active collaborations with politicians, policy-makers, interest groups, etc. Collaborative non-academic research partners are therefore increasingly needed in order to secure research funding but little attention seems to have been given to how this co-dependency might affect criticality. Or to put the same point slightly differently, how the "bright side" of co-production in terms of fostering new insights and promoting engagement (see Williams et al., 2020) needs to be set against what Oliver, Kothari and Mays (2019) describe as "the dark side of coproduction." Co-production is viewed as costly in the sense that it is "time-consuming, ethically complex, emotionally demanding, inherently unstable, vulnerable to external shocks, [and] subject to competing demands and expectations" (Flinders et al., 2016, p. 261). What's generally over-looked, however, is how *needing to work with potential research-users* implicitly affects independence and criticality. There is, however, at least some evidence that points to the existence of exactly the form of Faustian bargain that this article seeks to warn against. Smith and Stewart's (2017) study of how social policy scholars engaged with the impact agenda, for example, uncovered significant concerns (p. 121). As one of their interviewees noted:

> "One of the problems is that if you're pushed to do more and more policy relevant research and to align what you do ever more closely to the needs of policy-makers and practitioners, I think *what's never really discussed*…is the fact that what you end up doing is… *potentially losing some of your independence*. Even if you …try to be an independent researcher… *it can be very difficult not to make compromises*" [emphasis added].

The most common response to this dilemma was, interviewees admitted, making their policy recommendations deliberately vague with the strategic intention of ensuring that their findings were not perceived as being too critical of policy audiences. The paradox of this strategic response by academics is that policy-makers are often highly critical of the way in which academic research tends to lack precision and granularity (see Institute for Government, 2019).

This article has so far identified two shifts in the research landscape that are designed to encourage closer researcher/research-user engagement. The first was the introduction of externally-imposed "impact regimes" (Table 1, above); the second was a clear shift by research funders to support forms of co-design and co-production whereby researchers and potential research-users worked through collaborative partnerships. A third dimension of this debate with clear implications for independence and criticality revolves around a shift whereby research funding is increasingly attached to *state-directed* topics (see Table 2, below). The core argument being that the dominant paradigm of research funding is shifting from the traditional "research-into-policy" model towards an increasingly common "policy/politics-into-research" model (see Boswell & Smith, 2017). Whether industrial challenges, global challenges or climate challenges the point being made is that sources of open or "discovery" research are

TABLE 2 Modes of determining research relevance.

	"Type I" Scholar-Selected	**"Type II" State-Directed**
Intellectual Scope	Open	Limited
Research-Policy Model	→ Research Policy/Politics	→ Policy/Politics Research
Role of Politicians	None/Limited	Significant/Directive
Common Emphasis	Pure knowledge/problem-orientated	Applied/solution-focused
Research Governance	Arm's-length/independent/academic led	Hypothecated/politicised/ user-assessors
Selection	Peer review	Hybrid processes
Methodological Predilection	Pluralistic/Mixed	Co-production/Co-design
	Country Examples	
United Kingdom	UKRI Responsive Mode	Global Challenges Fund, Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, etc.
Germany	DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, German Research Association)	Mission-orientated (Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF); other federal and state ministries)

Source. Adapted from Eisfeld and Flinders (2021).

increasingly limited, while additional investments in governmental research and development funding tend to be state-directed in nature and, as such, require that academics work within a specific framing or idiom if they are to secure funding. In September 2022, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK announced a £20 m investment to create Local Policy and Innovation Partnerships. However, the opening line of the application guidance states that the initiative is focused only on "priorities that contribute towards inclusive sustainable economic growth." The opportunity is therefore positioned within an explicit commitment to market-based thinking, and academics who seek to secure funding must therefore work within that idiom.

This shift resonates with the arguments of Hartley, Pearce and Taylor (2017) "against the tide of depoliticization" vis-à-vis research governance but in some sense traditional zero-sum "politicising-versus-depoliticising" approaches (see Fawcett et al., 2017) fail to capture the "double-dynamic" this article seeks to emphasise. Parallel processes *of both politicisation and depoliticisation* are occurring within the research ecosystem. Politicising in the sense of a shift towards state-directed research funding; *depoliticising* in relation to the closing down of space for criticality and fundamental questioning (discussed below). The key argument being that as research funding increasingly shifts towards "Type II" then so too does the shadow of the state begin to incentivise specific topics and approaches in ways which may demand that being "relevant" requires a degree of deference, or at the very least alignment with existing policy priorities.

This is exactly the dilemma this article seeks to underline and where Noam Chomsky's 1967 essay in the *New York Review of Books* provides insight. Chomsky identified two types of intellectual: "technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals" and "value-orientated intellectuals". The former were "the good guys" in the eyes of the establishment who served the needs of the system; while the latter were "the bad guys" from an establishment perspective who dared to speak truth to power, exposed lies and engaged in critical analysis. Of particular relevance for political science was the fact that in making this distinction Chomsky was in fact quoting from the Trilateral Commission's *The Crisis of Democracy* report of 1975. "The report praises the "technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals" as serious and honourable, fulfilling their

responsibility to design and implement policy soberly and responsibly". Chomsky (2019) later noted "It sharply criticises the "value-orientated intellectuals" (p. 78) who see their responsibility differently. In the eyes of the Commission, such intellectuals are sentimental and emotional (or with more insidious designs). They promote disorder and corrupt the youth, helping bring about the "crisis of democracy"". For Chomsky, far from undermining democracy, such "value-orientated intellectuals" were critical to maintaining a healthy democracy through their commitment to speak the truth and expose lies, to provide historical context, and to lift the veil of ideology, the underlying framework of ideas that limits the boundaries of debate.

Chomsky's distinction between "technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals" and "value-orientated intellectuals" resonates with the core argument of this article regarding "impotence through relevance" in the sense that the changing academic incentives system, the emergence of the impact agenda and increasing professional insecurity may encourage more political scientists to adopt an approach to engaged scholarship which is essentially "technocratic and policy-orientated". One interesting reflection that emerges from Chomsky's distinction is how incredibly deferential and accepting academe, in general, and political science, in particular, has been to the emergence of the impact agenda. While numerous special editions, articles and books have been written there has been very little professional reaction *against* the imposition of impact regimes. It is in exactly this vein that Watermeyer (2019) highlights a "shortfall of resistance" (p. 45): "the academic rank and file of those who might be considered the academic proletariat are a silent or silenced majority and/or those who have reconciled themselves to higher education's new corporate world". Alis Oancea (2008) highlights the manner in which powerful and highly bureaucratic forms of internalised "performative accountability" have now existed within academe for several decades and this may have implicitly shaped the intellectual identity of many academics away from any recognition of possessing any broad societal value-orientated role, while inculcating the absorption of more individualised and technocratic practices. Such concern regarding the perceived decline in academic independence and criticality might easily lead into a discussion of Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), or even to Frank Furedi's biting attack on "the evident banalization of university life" in his *Where have all the intellectuals gone*? (2004), but there is a more pressing need to build upon Chomsky's heuristic and to forge a more sophisticated approach to understanding and addressing the risk of "impotence through relevance".

BEYOND (IR)RELEVANCE

The central argument of this article is that *relevance brings risks*. The political nature of these risks has been under-acknowledged. They present particular challenges for political science. In order to develop this line of argument there is a need to tease apart the politics of (ir)relevance in order to move beyond the blunt dichotomies and generally zero-sum oppositions ("good" v "bad", "dark" v "bright", "technocratic" v "normative", "politicised" v "depoliticized", etc.) that have generally characterised debates towards a more fluid and sophisticated framing. The benefit of such an approach is that not only will it expose and explain the inner logic of the "impotence through relevance" thesis, but (more importantly) it will promote a positive-sum focus on diversity and criticality both within and beyond academe. As such, the main contribution of this section is to utilise Peter Hall's (1993) work on levels of policy change as an analytical framework (see Table 3, below) through which to make three points: there is already some evidence that academics are if not embracing then ceding to the Faustian bargain (i.e. *they are "bending with the wind"*); but (secondly) it is too simplistic to define anyone who engages as necessarily having been co-opted or becoming uncritical (i.e. *engaged scholars can be critical*); and (thirdly) that the most pressing issue at a disciplinary level revolves around professional understanding and the maintenance of a healthy intellectual ecosystem (i.e. *protecting pluralism*).

TABLE 3 The impact ladder.

Level of Change	Political Level	Focus	Temporality	Precision	Criticality
Third Order	Macro	Goals, Values and Ideas	Long-term [ideational, fuzzy, critical]	Low [Enlightenment Function]	High [Transforming]
Second Order	Meso	Policies, Procedures and Governance	Medium-term [sectoral, clear, collaborative]	Medium [Policy Advice]	Medium [Improving]
First Order	Micro	Instruments, Settings and Tools	Short-term [quick, specific, solution-focused]	High [Technocratic Design]	Low [Tinkering]

Source: Adapted from Hall (1993) (see also Smith & Stewart, 2017, p. 118).

Table 3 is offered here as little more than a theoretical or conceptual framework; a heuristic that aids understanding in relation to a complex, contested, and multi-dimensional issue. It helps to identify the existence of a root problem or challenge (i.e. that some scholars might 'bend with the wind' in terms of trading their freedom to be critical for access to research funding) but – more importantly – Table 3 reveals the nested nature of such trade-offs and how different dimensions of (un)criticality can co-exist across and within different levels. It does not identify specific books or studies as exemplars for the simple reason that the aim of this article is not to 'name and shame' individuals but simply to highlight a systemic risk to the discipline of political science that has so far escaped detailed and open acknowledgment. The great benefit of being able to bend with the wind, as the modern design of high buildings or structures and the natural evolution of tall flowers or trees testifies, is that forces can be dissipated and displaced. In relation to the study of politics, however, the situation is far more complex.

"Bending With the Wind"

First and foremost, the "impotence through relevance" argument relates to the temptation that in order to deliver demonstrable evidence of impact scholars will focus more on first and second order issues (through "state-directed" funding streams and forms of co-production with research-users). The output and outcome of that research may well be *relevant* in some limited sense and tangible for audit purposes, but in terms of criticality and independence it is also likely to be predominantly technocratic and depoliticised in nature (i.e. focused on "what works" and performance improvements within an existing policy paradigm). As relevance regimes (Table 1, above) demand evidence of impact (which is often provided through testimonial statements provided by practitioners) and funding is distributed around politically-mandated societal challenges (i.e. a "politics/policy-to-research" dynamic) then so too do the incentives increase for scholars to adopt a micro-political focus. This is because research that is more specific, technical and granular is likely to address the day-to-day needs of research users and therefore deliver neat and demonstrable evidence of impact. The flip-side argument being that a focus on the "big picture", more transformative and critical thinking may well fulfil a fundamental "enlightenment function" (Weiss, 1977) within society, but it is unlikely to fulfil the simplistic, short-term and linear demands that the increasing "shadow of the state" is exerting (on this precise issue see the debate between Johnson, 2022, and Flinders, 2023a).

"Research for policy's sake" as Weiss (1979) argued will, by definition, operate within a bounded rationality that restricts criticality. "By rewarding researchers for achieving impact we are adopting an arbitrary incentive system that is at best decoupled from research quality, and at worst" Boswell and Smith (2017) suggest "threatens the integrity and independence of social science" (p. 44). It is this emphasis on "integrity and independence" which this article seeks to bring to the fore through its "impotence through relevance" argument. The bargain-based tensions within this emphasis were uncovered when one-third of the academics within Smith and Stewart's (2017) study admitted that the "impact agenda" could inadvertently (or even, a few respondents suggested, deliberately) encourage researchers to pursue work that is sympathetic to existing short-term policy directions, on the basis that such research was more likely to have a traceable policy impact (p. 122). The notion of "bending with the wind" was used to describe how "being impactful" required at least some acceptance of the need to restrict criticality.

The implication being that those "heroic" academics who are known as "high-impact" scholars *may have* essentially acquired their reputation for relevance by moving down the "impact ladder" outlined in Table 3. In essence, *they have acquired a reputation for relevance by focusing on low-level issues within an existing policy paradigm* (i.e. they have become what Chomsky labelled as "technical and policy-orientated intellectuals" and may have unwittingly

or purposely engaged in a Faustian bargain). At the same time those scholars who operate in the realm of ideas at the macro-political level may actually *be far more impactful at a transformational level* (as Chomsky's "value-orientated intellectuals" fulfilling an enlightenment function) while being dismissed as irrelevant – and therefore of little academic or societal value – due to the naivety of existing impact assessment processes. The basic challenge underlined by this point is that the actual impact or relevance of broad third-order focused studies is that because they are so broad, wide ranging and often operate in the realm of ideas their impact upon society is difficult to assess, measure or quantify. Tight first-order projects that possess an applied element from inception are more able (although not completely) to cope with this epistemological challenge by dint of their greater focus. What's interesting and relatively obvious from the systematic analyses of REF2014 in the UK is that more specific, tight and uncritical (i.e. micro-political) impact case studies tended to score far higher than broader, more critical "macro-political" case studies (see Oancea, 2013; Back, 2015; Smith & Stewart, 2017; Selby, 2018). To operate at the top of the impact ladder is, apparently, a risky endeavour.

"Avoiding the Reductionist Trap"

The great weakness of Chomsky's distinction, however, is that it arguably creates a "reductionist trap". It reduces all intellectuals (scholars included) to just two types, and it defines criticality solely as the preserve of those who refuse to engage. More recently, Van Ostaijen and Jhagroe (2022) arguably fell into this trap with their searing critique and argument that "positive public administration" (PPA) (i.e. a focus on high-performing organisations and policy successes; see Douglas et al., 2021) is a retrograde step "toward more traditional, affirmative, and instrumental [public administration] knowledge production. We consider this as a rather romantic, nostalgic, and regressive turn to the past and the inability to actually innovate public administration as a field" (pp. 268–269). PPA is, from this perspective, defined as the collection of technical and instrumental knowledge. The authors draw upon Michael Burawoy (2005) to suggest that such knowledge is "particularly productive for the benefit of (state) powers". They proceed to suggest that "[as] a consequence this [i.e. PPA] will produce "useable" knowledge to maintain the social order and conserve "reality as it is". Drawing on the work of Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) and Marcuse (1991), Van Ostaijen and Jhagroe locate the shift towards "policy/politics-into-research" as acknowledged above as little more than a "further rationalization and technocratization of state-society relations as predisposed upon the basic legitimation of instrumental knowledge." With echoes of this article's core "impotence through relevance" concern, Van Ostaijen and Jhagroe (2022) quote Thompson's (2017, p. 232) critique of "mainstream contemporary social sciences, which for all intents and purposes, remains an essentially a-critical and politically affirmative intellectual enterprise" (p. 265).

The problem with such a one-dimensional position is that it fails to capture fluidity and criticality across and between different levels of policy. Putting the same point slightly differently, it is theoretically possible to focus on the improvement or refinement of low-level policies (Table 3, above) while at the same time being critical of mid-level policy frameworks and dominant macro-political ideas. An environmental intervention, for example, that installed large wood and sediment berms to threatened chalk stream rivers could through geological mapping, water samples, fish life and other quality indicators be interpreted as a localised policy success (see England et al., 2019). The comparative analyses of similar rivers might underline a positive causal relationship between intervention and non-intervention, and innovations in participatory methods might also be used to enable "citizen scientists" to monitor and record water quality, river levels, species diversity, etc. (see Kelly-Quinn et al., 2022). The simple point being made is that the identification of some element of success – "to reveal [what] may not be perfect but still good" (Douglas et al. 2019, p. 10) – could have positive policy relevant insights that might be scaled-up, −out or -down to achieve

broader public benefits. The key point, however, is that to recognise some element of success at a local level does not in any way restrict a researcher's capacity for adopting a highly critical stance on broader national river policies (mid-level) or more fundamental questions relating to economic growth and environmental sustainability. "Impotence through relevance" is, from this position, not inevitable. The identification of micro-level policy "wins" may in fact be used to inform, sustain and reframe wider (bottom-up) criticisms of dominant policy paradigms; micro-political "tinkering" or "bending with the wind" may in fact be viewed as "acts of resistance", a gateway endeavour or a contribution to anti-system thinking (see Flinders, 2023b).

"Ecosystems Not Individuals"

The most important point emerging out of Table 3 has little to do with individual scholars and more to do with the overall mix and blend within the broader intellectual system. A healthy discipline is likely to demonstrate two core features. First and foremost, the capacity to tolerate and nurture a range of scholarly types or species from eccentric and radically-minded "value-orientated" intellectuals through to more engaged and policy-focused (and no less value-orientated) specialists. Second and more significantly, a healthy discipline is likely to nurture academics with the capacity to "trespass" (Hirschman, 1981) or "range" (Epstein, 2019) across traditional institutional, disciplinary and professional boundaries (including policy levels, Table 3, above). The concern in terms of ecosystem dynamics is one of species depletion. The shifts in the research funding landscape that this article has attempted to reveal – specifically the shift to state-selected forms of funding (Table 2, above) – risk squeezing out the space for eccentric, awkward, anti-system or radical thinkers who *may*, by shaping the realm of ideas and agitating the public, actually be the most relevant and high-impact scholars at a transformational level. The fact that Smith and Stewart (2017) found academics suggesting that they now worked in "institutional settings which would no longer accommodate academics who were not willing to engage with audiences beyond academia" (p. 113) is a worrying sign for the health of the broader ecosystem.

Selby's (2018) work on critical international relations speaks directly to both this ecosystem emphasis and this article's "impotence through relevance" argument. His analysis of 43 impact case studies from the field of international relations (IR) submitted to the 2014 REF in the UK found that "not a single one" was explicitly or even implicitly underpinned by a critical perspective. "To the contrary", Selby notes:

"The vast majority of IR case studies [were] essentially technical or mildly reformist narratives or organic intellectuals helping western governments and associated inter-governmental organisations to refine their techniques of liberal governance…my concern is with the state of the field's putatively critical approaches, and its critical ethos and imagination" (p. 336).

Many international scholars might reject such concerns on the basis that they are not *yet* constrained by the constraints of the UK system. But as Table 1 seeks to emphasise, a global process of impact intensification is observable and, as a result, myopic or naïve thinking is best avoided. And for political science in particular *the political challenges* posed by a rapidly changing research, development and innovation ecosystem can no longer reside in the shadows.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

This article has promoted a rather uncomfortable argument: those who are hailed and rewarded for being *most impactful* may in fact be amongst the *least relevant* sections of the academic community when viewed from a more radical and fundamental perspective. "Impotence through relevance" is a real risk due to the manner in which dominant definitions (or more precisely

institutionally-dictated *interpretations*) of relevance generally demand that scholars operate *within* a specific idiom. This pressure has not only increased due to the emergence of the "tyranny of relevance" (Flinders, 2013) and "the impact agenda" (Smith et al., 2020) but due to an increasing preference amongst research funders to support the co-production and co-design of research, and also due to a shift towards state-directed research funding. These latter two elements have generally been overlooked but combine through an emphasis on impact to create what this article has framed as a potential "Faustian bargain". In this "bargain" academics essentially buy access to lucrative collaborative funding opportunities by implicitly agreeing to constrain their criticality and thereby, to some extent, becoming co-opted into the system. This explains Back's (2015) powerful argument about "impact" being "on the side of the powerful" which, in turn, explains why this is a particular challenge for political science.

Put very simply, the very essence of political science revolves around the analysis, understanding and questioning of power. Returning to the opening section of this article, criticality *vis-à-vis* power exists as the very "soul" of political science and, as such, a political science which allows itself to be co-opted or is not, at least, alert to the risk has in essence "sold out". When faced with growing inequality, climate change and an array of societal challenges it is not the role of the social and political sciences to produce empirical intelligence about "what works", or to tinker at the edges of existing policy or institutional design. It is the job of those disciplines *to retain and sustain* a sense of radical ambition which is why political science "needs to talk" – to paraphrase Smith and Stewart (2017) – far more loudly about the changing research landscape in order to *politicise* a number of processes. Taken together and without explicit reaction and rejection the three *input* (i.e. the shift to state-directed funding), *process* (i.e. the emphasis on co-production and co-design) and *output* (i.e. the introduction of non-academic "impact regimes") elements identified in this article risk not only combining to squeeze out the space for critical or radical perspectives, even denying their existence or value, but also incentivising a pressure to conform (i.e. a Faustian bargain). And yet, as Cairney and Oliver (2020) note, "few sources of advice address ethical or political dilemmas regarding… variations in the power and vulnerability of researchers when they engage in politics and policy", especially in relation to "pandering to the ideology of our audience" (p. 229). If sources of advice and structures of collegiality are to be built, new talent management structures put in place, and if political science is to play a role in relation to *particulars*, *policies and paradigms* (Table 3, above) then the political dilemmas posed by emergent and ongoing shifts in the global meta-governance of research need to move out of the shadows and to the very centre of debates about the future of political science.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable as no data was generated or analysed for this study.

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