

**Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in Undergraduate Social Science:
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‘Strengthening the Teaching of University Social Science’

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Why does the teaching of social science need to be strengthened?

It is not entirely clear from the report whether the *teaching* of social science needs to be strengthened (the paper suggests it is relatively strong across a range of unequally funded and represented universities), or the *public perception of the teaching* of, or the *value of*, social science is at issue. Both comments – ‘we want to contribute to the articulation and demonstration of its value’ and ‘how can we preserve and strengthen the value of undergraduate social science education’ – seem to suggest the latter (p. 1).

The problem as outlined in the discussion paper is that (a) studying social science is a complex and personally transformative social practice and experience, (b) the transformative dimensions of this experience are linked with intellectual labour and challenge, and with democratic life, (c) access to this transformative experience is distributed unequally through the production of political discourses about its relative value for different classes of individuals, and through the reframing of social science education as a practice of economic exchange, (d) access to this transformative experience is not distributed unequally in predictable ways across differently ‘classed’ institutions, and (e) the prevailing discourses and ways of knowing about the nature and value of social science education fail to capture any of this complexity.

The implication of this is that the teaching of social science needs to be preserved within universities because it is presently a space where personally transformative intellectual work may be undertaken, and because the sorts of transformative experiences that students describe in the research are commensurate with the formation of democratic subjectivities, identities, ‘competencies’ and ‘capabilities’, etc. The devaluation of social science education in universities is thus an attack on democracy (or at least critical citizenship); its devaluation in *particular* universities – not ‘rated’ through prestige – amounts to a hierarchization or even an apartheid of democratic potential. But it is still not clear whether the problem of its devaluation is created by a lack of public understanding of these effects (which are presented as being self-evident in the report), or by a devaluation of these subjectivities and practices more generally within society.

My understanding of *why* we need to strengthen the teaching of university social science diverges somewhat here, as I believe there is some tension between the sorts of liberal and, to some extent, critical social scientific knowledge and practice that are valued in the report, and the politics and functions of the contemporary university as an institution. Much of the history of social science education that inspires me is located outside the formal structures of higher education, critical of canonical academic knowledge, and I regard the professionalization of social science as both an accomplishment and – particularly in the current sense of the term – a problem. I would thus want to unpack the concept of ‘strengthening’, which could be read in a number of contradictory ways (e.g. ‘strong science’ and ‘strong theory’ vs. a strengthening of the transformational effects and political usefulness of knowledge). My thoughts about how and why to strengthen the teaching of social science, therefore, often include questions about *what sorts of institutions* or anti-institutions are appropriate for this project, and at present my thoughts about strengthening our social

scientific and pedagogical work *within* the university often draw insights from projects that seek to *transform* the nature and purpose of traditionally-conceived academic space.

What implications for the teaching of social science can we draw from the report?

The project offers a number of useful tools for helping us to articulate what a meaningful social science education entails, and the things we might need to do in order to make it effective. One is the identification of 'disciplinary, personal and performative' dimensions of a 'pedagogic identity', which draws our attention to the centrality of creating and maintaining strong relationships between knowledge, situated experience, practices of learning and teaching, and social action. The report suggests, as commensurate with other critical theory and research about critical education from the eighteenth century to today, that people learn better, enjoy learning more and undertake more personally and socially transformative learning when these elements of the practice of education are synergistic rather than fragmented, where there is a holism rather than a partial attention to one element or the other, and when they can explore these dimensions in critical dialogue with other human beings. The problem is not that we don't know this. The problem is that the institutions of education in which social scientific knowledge is presently ensconced are being structurally and culturally organised precisely *to* compartmentalise knowledge, experience, learning and social action, and that the discourses of educational reform which have an impact on how it is possible to operate within the university work precisely to shape and legitimise this agenda.

Part of what we need to defend the values and potentials of social science education for democratic society life and – although muted in this report, the transformative improvement of social life itself – is therefore to fight for the right to work in public institutions that at the very least do not contradict the most basic elements of meaningful pedagogy. There are various ways to approach this: large-scale transformations of institutional systems from within, the creation of alternative institutions or anti-institutions beyond. But perhaps more interesting are the possibilities that inhere in what the discussion paper calls the 'performative aspect' of pedagogic identity, which I understand to be a micro-politics of pedagogy – experimenting with forms of pedagogy that help people to learn not how to 'know' critical social science, but to 'do' it both inside and outside the formal classroom.

Bernstein's categories of 'pedagogic rights' offer an interesting way into this. For although I believe they are too conservative and individualised to be adopted as criteria for critical social science education, they offer an alternative baseline of certain rights that educational institutions should serve and defend. We do not have to look to the frontlines of radically alternative kinds of education to develop these categories more critically. We might just as easily reflect backwards on some of the original motivations for teaching critical social science in this and other countries, which has as often as not been about the *right to autonomous knowledge about the conditions, limits and possibilities of one's own existence*, and about the *right to produce knowledge that enables one to recognise, critique and transcend limitations on possibility*.

The project of strengthening the personally and socially critical potentials of social science education therefore involves considerable elements of *political struggle and imagination* as well as good teaching (the last of which appears to already be in place and thus needs no comment). What students appear to tell us in the research project resonate with and triangulate what we have thought to be true from other sources of knowledge as well: learning is transformative when it is humane, collective, serious, intellectually and emotionally challenging, not reduced to instrumental ends, holistic and not alienated from itself or from wider social concerns. There is so much within this broad understanding that has long been known to be problematic and contested, all sorts of politics of knowledge and education that we have lost sight of. But it is almost impossible to speak of pedagogy today,

or of critical education, so drowning are we in the neutralising and obscurantist discourses of teaching and learning. We seem to spend a great deal of time simply trying to figure out *how not to destroy* teaching with the university; how to teach disciplinary knowledge more critically and efficiently within the very ideological and bureaucratic systems that much of our social scientific research itself reveals to be deleterious for human flourishing and social justice.

My opinion is therefore that we need to dedicate more energy to refusing these systems of value, and either working seriously to create spaces that are conducive to teaching critical social science within the university or to create spaces that are conducive to teaching social science elsewhere, without abdicating the rights of space and time that the university as a social institution still promises to honour. I do not suggest that the improvement of social science education is *only* a political problem; rather, that we cannot deal effectively with the intellectual and pedagogical issues without recognising the political contradiction between critical social science, critical education and the extant institutional formations and purposes of the university itself.