

# Social researchers must continue to engage in the systematic exploration of the world as it is and as it could be.

**LSE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/09/how-do-societies-think-and-how-might-they/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/12/09/how-do-societies-think-and-how-might-they/)

12/9/2013

*How researchers and the state understand the scope of social research plays a pivotal role in the future of impact. **Geoff Mulgan** argues society at large – the public, researchers and the government – must all adapt their practices to take evidence seriously and to take part in policy implementation. Social researchers are in a unique position as they are required to be engaged with power, but remain ultimately accountable to the public not the state.*



There are two competing traditions of social research. In one tradition it is an arm of the state, concerned with mapping and measuring society the better to shape it. The word **statistics** reflects this (Prussian) origin. And it's not surprising that any state should want to understand society, and to exercise some control over its tendencies to disorder, criminality or, in some cases, dissent.

The other tradition runs in the opposite direction. It sees the role of social research as inherently oppositional. Its task is to reveal the otherwise hidden patterns of power, oppression and exploitation. Its ethos is critical. It assumes that people are vulnerable to 'false consciousness' of various kinds – seeing as natural social institutions that are in fact constructed. Its task is to give people courage to resist.

Is a synthesis of these possible? Can we describe an ideal of social research in service to society that is neither beholden to the state, nor detached from the day to day challenges of public power?

I hope so, and that it's possible to grow research which gravitates neither to 'policy-based evidence', or to the academic equivalent of the school of journalism which, when dealing with any kind of politics or state starts from the presumption: 'why is this lying b\*\*tard lying to me?'



But that will require the parties to social research to change. States need to move further:

- From **closed to open** – so that the default for data and information is that it should be open to the public, including huge amounts of information that used to be considered internal (our current Nesta project mapping adoption of **innovations in the health service** is a good example of this).
- From **engineering to experiment** – moving away from top down grand plans imposed onto society towards a model of experimentalism where every new ideas is tested on a small scale before being extended. **I-teams** are examples of how this can be done, as is the Nesta Innovation Lab.
- From **assumption to evidence**: moving from government by intuition and ideology to government informed by evidence – with the generation and sharing of evidence as part of the day to day work of government and every level of public services (the main theme of the Alliance for Useful Evidence and the new 'what works' centres).
- From **acting on to acting with**: moving away from just 'seeing like a state' to also seeing like a citizen-connecting the macro view of the state to systematic engagement with lived experience in all areas of policy, for example through the use of ethnography and engagement (a big theme of '**People Powered Health**' for

example).

These shifts require the public to engage – to reward politicians who take evidence seriously; to take part in policy and implementation rather than just sit on the sidelines. And they require social researchers to be engaged with power but always ultimately accountable to the public not the state.

Even more than that, it requires social researchers to be committed not just to describing the world as it is, but also to return to older traditions of social science which emphasised its role in imagination, the systematic exploration of the world as it could be.

**Geoff Mulgan is the keynote speaker at this year's [Social Research Association](#) annual conference taking place today, Monday 9th December.**

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the Author**

**Geoff Mulgan** is Chief Executive of Nesta (the UK's National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts). Nesta combines investment in early stage companies, grant programmes in fields ranging from health and education to the arts and giving, and research. From 2004-2011 Geoff was the first Chief Executive of the Young Foundation, which became a leading centre for social innovation, combining research, creation of new ventures and practical projects.

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