Curiosity and the Politics of Impact

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The politics of the impact agenda have been framed as a struggle for academic freedom and the space for curiosity. The UK's largest academic trade union, the UCU (University and College Union), presented its opposition to the recent acceleration of the impact agenda as a defence of curiosity. The UCU General Secretary, Sally Hunt, spoke out for "curiosity-driven research" and for universities that are free to be "spaces in which the spirit of adventure thrives". This rhetoric has been widely endorsed and echoed, including by thousands of members who signed a UCU petition defending academic curiosity (Hunt, 2009).

But this picture of the politics of impact – as a battle between free and constrained, curious and utilitarian enquiry – is complicated and contested by others. Not only within government and in the bodies that fund and regulate universities and academic research, but among others too including ordinary academics with a range of politics, there is sympathy for the drive towards more applied and 'useful' research, coupled with suspicion of apparently indulgent activity driven purely by curiosity. These mixed feelings resonate widely, beyond the immediate context of the impact debates in the UK. As discussed in the editorial introduction, parallel debates and perspectives are found in other times and places – such as the US, where rough equivalents include 'relevance' (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005) – and this raises broader issues and debates about the apparent tensions between impact or relevance and curiosity.[2]

[2] This commentary develops ideas published in two other pieces, which are free to access and download via links in the bibliography: Phillips (2010a) and Phillips (2010b).

There is *some* justification for framing the impact agenda as the enemy of curiosity, and for drawing political battle lines around this, as the UCU has done. Though the dichotomy between impact and curiosity is simplistic, it does correspond to a more genuine distinction: between research in which the outcomes are planned and understood to be predictable, and that in which they are acknowledged to be more open-ended. And in the UK, through the impact agenda, the former have been systematically promoted at the expense of the latter.

But curiosity and the practical work of making an impact *need not* compete; they can work together. Critics of the impact agenda have pointed out that curiosity-driven research frequently has impacts and applications, which cannot be planned or predicted. David Edwards, the Harvard Professor and entrepreneur behind a series of 'art-science labs', argues that creative and ultimately practical work depends upon "space to dream" and insists that this space be free of short-term concerns about applications and returns (Edwards, 2010).

So: how does curiosity generate impacts and, more specifically, the sorts of impacts we might want? The answer to this question – if there is one – is beyond the scope of this brief commentary, however, I do have space to outline two mechanisms connecting curiosity and impact.

First, curiosity can be embedded within practical activity. In what he calls craftwork, sociologist Richard Sennett (2008, 33) finds "the intimate, fluid join between problem solving and problem finding". Speaking not only of universities but also construction sites, hospitals, factories, and so on – he finds the desire for "curiosity and experiment" in a wide range of settings (Sennett, 2008: 33). These arguments resonate with experiences of research, teaching and learning: for example in doctoral studentships in which universities collaborate with industrial partners; in 'translational sciences' where problems identified in medical practice are isolated for investigation (Demeritt and Lees, 2005); and in progressive pedagogical techniques such as Problem Based Learning (PBL) in which practical problems "are used to engage students' *curiosity* and initiate learning" (Pawson et al., 2006, 105).

Second, curiosity can be a catalyst for social engagement, which makes a positive impact on people's lives. Though curiosity has sometimes been portrayed as indulgent and a privilege, allusions have also been made to the social function and value of curiosity. Michel Foucault once claimed – suggestively and speculatively – that curiosity "evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist" (Foucault, 1988[1980], 328).   Sennett (2012), exploring this contention in greater depth, has suggested that our curiosity in the lives of others can be a source of empathy and, in turn, cooperation. These principles are being applied in practical ways, for example in Liverpool's Decade of Health and Wellbeing, which encourages curiosity in other people and places as a pathway to wellbeing: an 'impact' (NEF, 2008).

So let's not speak of curiosity *or* impact. There may be conflict between curiosity and the impact *agenda*, but not between curiosity and impact. Struggles over impact have brought curiosity into focus, and opened up a debate about the spaces of curiosity: as they are and as they might be, which *I* think is worth pursuing.

Reaching from impact to the broader issues it raises, we can also reach beyond the parochialism that might have otherwise come from moves initiated by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) or the UK Government, to something with wider and more positive relevance and resonance.[3] The politics of impact and curiosity are not as clear-cut as the UCU originally suggested, but it has been productive to politicise these terms, and to raise questions about how to forge a more nuanced politics of impact, with space for curiosity: that powerful and unpredictable driver of ideas and politics.

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[3] Other dimensions of this broader debate are identified and developed in a special issue of Periscope, the online edition of *Social Text*, edited by Tariq Jazeel with contributions by Neil Smith on neoliberal universities and by Paula Meth and Glyn Williams on the significance of the impact agenda for research in the global south (Jazeel, 2010).

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