'Impact', research and slaying Zombies: The pressures and possibilities of the REF

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Abstract

- *Purpose:* The paper reflects critically upon current debates and tensions in the governance of research in the UK and more widely, particularly the imperative that social science research should demonstrate impact beyond the academy.

- *Design/methodology/approach:* Drawing implicitly upon Bevir's theory of governance, the paper positions discourses about 'research excellence and research impact' as elite narratives that are rooted genealogically in forms of managerial audit culture which seek to govern the practices of social science academics. The article reviews relevant literature, draws upon key contributions that have shaped debate and refers to the author's own research and experiences of 'research impact'.

- *Findings:* Initiatives such as the UK's 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF) can be understood as a form of governance that further enables already present neo-liberalising tendencies in the academy. The 'impact agenda' has both negative (e.g. it can distort research priorities and can lead to overstatement of 'real world' effects) and positive potential (e.g. to provide institutional space for work towards social justice, in line with long-standing traditions of critical social science and 'public sociology').

- *Research limitations/implications:* There is a need for more critical research and theoretical reflection on the value, threats, limitations and potential of current forms of research governance and 'impact'.

- *Originality/value:* To date, there are very few article-length, critical discussions of these developments and issues in research governance, even fewer that connect these debates to longer-standing radical imperatives in social science.

Key words: research excellence/ research impact/ governance/ REF/

Classification: Conceptual paper

Introduction

Such is the strength of hostility in respect of new forms of research governance in the UK that critics picture universities as being in the grip of 'a monster, a Minotaur that must be appeased by bloody sacrifices', first among these being academic principle and freedom (Scott, 2013). Although the focus of the discussion in this paper is the UK its relevance is not restricted to it; several other countries (e.g. Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand) have developed similar systems for research governance and assessment (see Stahl, 2015). Drawing upon Bevir's (2013) ideas about decentered forms of governance, this article interprets such developments in UK research governance – specifically the increasing imperative, enshrined in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) and the conditions applied by UK Research Councils, to demonstrate 'real world' impact beyond the academy – as a form of *elite narrative* that seeks to govern the day to day practices of social scientists. REF requires researchers to explain and demonstrate the impact their studies have had in 'the real world', with multi-millions of pounds of funding resting on assessments of this. Because of its obvious connections with social improvement and reform through policy action, social policy is regarded as one disciplinary area that is well-placed to meet and benefit from this 'impact agenda'. Nevertheless, objections to REF, including to the impact agenda, have not subsided. Although some critical researchers welcome the opportunities provide by REF to engage in progressive, research informed practice, others see in it the grubby hands of neo-liberal governance further eroding academic freedom.

That said, there has been relatively little extended critique and discussion in social policy-oriented journals about the promises and possibilities posed by the REF and its specific demand for impact. The author's survey of the 39 issues of *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* published from 2010 until the time of writing (July 2016) uncovered no articles related to this topic. Similarly, the literature searches by Smith and Stewart (2015, 2016) found no articles at all about impact in social policy journals (with numbers in single figures for other social science disciplines), with the authors noting the 'remarkably muted' response from social policy academics to the REF impact agenda (2016). Commentators in sister disciplines have, however, argued on the one hand that the REF is a prime example of a further twist in the neo-liberal managerialism and audit culture of the

contemporary university and, as such, should be resisted. On the other, 'impact' is said to allow spaces for progressive work towards social justice and thus warrants a cautious welcome. This latter position suggests the opportunity for social science academics to develop *local practices* to *resist* the elite narrative (Bevir, 2013).

These dilemmas are ones that are important and timely for those social scientists who, through their research, seek to make the world better. In this vein, the author has conducted research, with colleagues, that seeks to critique and debunk other powerful, elite narratives; ones about the causes and nature of worklessness and poverty in the UK. The researchers experimented with different ways to generate 'research impact' and were deemed to have been very successful in that respect by the 2014 REF exercise. The article draws on this research and these experiences as a case study in the possibilities and failures of 'impact'.

The article is organised into four parts, following this introduction. *First*, a brief description is given of these research projects, their findings and the attempts made towards impact. *Second*, the UK system for research funding and specifically the recent advent of 'the impact agenda' (under REF) is sketched out. Here we see how these systems for research governance *might* encourage and reward exactly the sort of critical, influential social science that many, including the author, have sought to produce. *Third*, ideas that are more critical of this REF impact agenda are presented, including doubts about the real extent of research impact (the case study examples included). *Fourth*, a 'synthetic' and pragmatic conclusion is suggested: one that acknowledges that principled efforts at research impact can be limited in their effect and be subsumed and commodified as just another aspect of the neo-liberal governance and marketisation of HE, at the same time as underscoring the continuing value, and necessity, of the attempts of a critical social science to confront dominant ideologies and to attack social injustice.

'Shirkers', 'Strivers' and 'Slaying Zombies': researching work, worklessness and welfare

In 2012, the author, together with colleagues at Teesside University, published two related and what proved to be two quite well-known studies about work, worklessness and welfare in the UK: *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-pay, No-pay Britain* (Shildrick et al, 2012a) and Are *cultures of worklessness passed down the generations?* (Shildrick et al, 2012b). Each

study also spun off a series of papers in academic journals (e.g. MacDonald et al, 2013; MacDonald et al, 2014).

The studies used qualitative methods to research the realities of working life and unemployment for individuals and families living in deindustrialised localities. They showed how economic marginality rather than complete economic exclusion was a predominant experience. The 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' of churning between low paid, low skilled and insecure jobs and periods of unemployment had become the norm. This precarity was driven by the increased insecurity of jobs that failed to provide permanent employment and to lift people away from poverty. The research also investigated a favoured trope of recent UK governments (shared across the two main political parties) which presents unemployed people as possessing 'a culture of welfare dependency' (HM Government, 2010) that is passed down in 'households where three generations have never had a job' (Tony Blair, 1997) and were the 'life-style choice' of unemployment prevails (Osborne, 2010). Unemployed lazy 'shirkers' are counter-posed in a moral binary with the 'strivers' and 'hard-working families' beloved of politicians (Jowit, 2013).

Sociological research is not renowned for coming to unequivocal conclusions. These two studies did. Powerful government and media-fomented narratives of an intergenerational workshy underclass were, simply, without empirical foundation – at least in their ability to explain anything other than the most extreme, atypical cases. Rather, conventional attitudes to and ethics in respect of employment and welfare prevailed. Both studies have been widely cited and the first went on to win the 2013 *British Academy Policy Press Peter Townsend Prize* (this is noted not to brag but in advance of the later discussion about the limits to the effects of this research).

Paul Spicker (2007: 102) describes how the long list of theories, stretching back over decades (see Welshman, 2013), that blame the poor for their poverty and the unemployed for their unemployment can be regarded as 'zombie arguments': 'no matter how many times they are shot down in flames or have a stake driven through their heart ... [they] seem to get up again afterwards'. When politicians and others assert *ad nauseam* that there are 'three (or four) generations of families where no-one has ever worked' it certainly feels like we are dealing with a zombie argument. Spicker (2007: 102) goes on to say that, just

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because these arguments 'keep coming back' does not mean 'we should lie down and let the zombies win' (see MacDonald et al, 2013).

The team of researchers followed various strategies to try to 'kill zombies' and to make this research influential outside of academia. As well as TV and radio news coverage, since 2012, somewhere in the region of fifty news stories, comment pieces and features about the research have appeared in regional and local newspapers, national 'quality' broadsheets (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Observer*, *The Financial Times*, *The Herald*), national tabloids (*The Daily Star*) and in foreign news media (Germany, Norway, Singapore). At times this has evoked strong public interest. For example, in 24 hours there were 500 comments posted in *The Guardian* in response to one feature (13th December 2012). Social media was used as well. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) estimates that one tweet about the research had, within a month, over one million 'impressions' on Twitter. One blog post for JRF was the most successful (in terms of 'hits') that they had ever hosted, at that point and another for the US site *Working Class Perspectives* had twenty thousand hits in the first week (again, the highest recorded at that point). Between them the researchers have spoken about these research projects at over 100 events, many by invitation and many have been to non-academic audiences (e.g. to members of the public, welfare practitioners, policy makers, politicians, Trade Unionists, school pupils).

Another strategy for disseminating the research findings and engaging with people who might be able to use it was via a Knowledge Exchange Project (KEP) (MacDonald et al, 2012), run in conjunction with a local authority and a network of voluntary sector agencies in Teesside. Part of the motivation was to ensure that the research was known to *local* policy makers, practitioners and politicians; the significance of this will become clearer later in the discussion. Over eighteen months the KEP showcased particular aspects of the research at seven events geared towards different audiences (e.g. the final event about policy conclusions was mainly for employers and local authority representatives). In total around four hundred people and over one hundred different organisations from Teesside and the wider North East of England participated in the KEP.

A fuller account of these attempts to make the research influential is contained within the 'impact case study' that was submitted to the REF 2014 exercise[1] (which is explained below). Given the coming discussion about the limits of research impact, it should be noted that the researchers also sought to influence national government, via evidence to select committees and meetings with Chairs of All Party Working Groups. The research has been cited in debates in both Houses of Parliament.

Research governance in the UK – and the advent of the 'impact agenda'

Here we turn to a discussion of the way that UK university research is governed, assessed and funded, paying particular attention to the valorisation of research that has impact outside of academia. At least on the face of it, it would seem that there is a happy congruence between emergent elite narratives and the practices of social science researchers who strive for social change (as was the case with the Teesside studies).

The UK government funds research through two main methods (the so-called 'dual system'), each of which is heavily skewed toward the concentration of resources in already successful, 'elite' universities. The 'Matthew Principle' is alive and well here; 'to he who has, shall be given'. Firstly, academics can bid directly to a research council (such as the Economic and Social Research Council, or ESRC) for funding. In 2012–13, universities (already) in the upper 20 per cent quintile for funding cumulatively secured 91.9 per cent of the total funding awarded to universities from research councils (Universities UK, 2014). Secondly, so-called QR funding is allocated to universities on the basis of the quality of their subject-specific submissions to an (approximately) six-yearly, national research assessment exercise (currently entitled the Research Excellence Framework or REF). In 2013-14 those universities in the top 20 per cent of the funding distribution received 75 per cent of all QR funding (ibid.). It is this second approach to research governance that is the main topic of this article.

Sayers (2015) helps us trace the genealogy of these assessment systems. With the rise of the 'New Public Management' from the mid-1980s and the drive to improve public services under 'best value regimes' (and pushed along by the more general neo-liberal thinking of the Conservative and, later, New Labour governments), came an emphasis on accountability, measurable outcomes and the quantification of performance (and the de-emphasising of activities that could not be easily measured) (McLaughlin et al, 2002).

Universities were not immune from these processes: 'questions were being voiced by Ministers over whether much of the HE output was economically valueless...and should be reduced in scale and somehow dramatically reformed' (Kogan and Hanney 2000: 89, cited in Sayers, 2015). From 1981, university funding allocations began to reflect quality judgements and thus began the explicit stratification of universities. Kogan and Hanney (2000: 97-98, cited in Sayers 2015) repeat an anecdote from Christopher Ball (then Warden of Keble College Oxford) about a dinner he attended with Peter Swinnerton-Dyer (chairman of the University Grants Committee) and David Phillips (Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils):

> we used to have dinner together and plan our strategy. One evening Peter said: 'I can no longer defend the funding of universities...without real accountability to government'... so we discussed it and I suppose at that dinner we invented the research selectivity exercise.

Here we see the origin of a system of research governance that kicked off five rounds of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), from 1986 onwards, and then the REF (which has had one exercise so far, in 2014), a system that Stahl interprets as a major element within 'the always expanding regimes of accountability and managerialism that are colonising all aspects of university life' (2015: 623). At the time of writing, a government review about the possibility and dimensions of a future REF (in 2020/2021) is underway. Around £1.6 billion of so-called 'QR' funding is distributed annually in this way. These have become enormously important in UK academia not only because of the funding that follows a successful submission but because of the status that comes from appearing high in the league tables for the quality of research that are subsequently published. Because of this, substantial amounts of time, effort and money are spent in planning for REF and in preparing and presenting submissions that are perceived to have the highest chance of being well judged by the peer review panels that make the quality judgements (i.e. 4* 'world-leading, 3* 'internationally excellent', 2* 'internationally recognised', 1* 'nationally recognised' and 'unclassified').

The REF has come in for enormous criticism (see Wilsdon, 2015; and Sayer, 2014, for a particularly damning account) because, for example: of the intrusive bureaucracy that it has

generated (diverting staff away from actually *doing* research or teaching); of its costs (estimated to be around £250 million for REF2014); it is seen as divisive (some universities exclude staff who are deemed not to score highly in these terms, with potentially negative consequences for their careers); it may have narrowed academic priorities (encouraging quicker, less risky research); quality judgements are necessarily subjective and contestable; and because it is a 'game' that can be 'played'[2] (Gill, 2014; Scott, 2013). Phelan (2016) equates these sort of 'bureaucratically elaborate audit regimes which purport to measure the quality of academic research' as prime examples of the new 'surveillance mechanisms' of the neo-liberal, 'corporate university'. Thus, REF has been accused of adding to an 'excessively managerial' approach that determines questions about 'hiring, firing and promotion', that inhibits academic freedom, promotes a deadening 'audit culture' and, essentially, adds to the armoury of management control (Gill, 2014).

A new element to the REF 2014 was that the impact of research outside of academic life became an element in quality judgements. Similarly, UK research councils give great emphasis to 'pathways to impact' in their funding decisions. For REF 2014, impact was 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 as the result of excellent research' (HEFCE, n.d). Twenty per cent of a department's overall quality weighting was given to this (with publication outputs and research environment accounting for the rest of the scoring). Rumours suggest that this proportion will increase with REF 2020/2021. In total, over 190,000 publications and nearly 7,000 impact case studies written by 52,000 full-time equivalent staff from 154 Higher Education Institutions were entered for REF 2014 (Jump, 2014). In brief, these are the dimensions, the origins and some of the main criticisms of the UK's Research Excellence Framework.

Impact and social justice?

At the inaugural meeting of the British Sociological Association's 'Activism Forum' (at the BSA conference 2014), members met to discuss how sociologists could play a more campaigning role in the world outside of the academy. Pragmatically, academics tend to work long hours and are faced with recurrent demands of teaching, administration, marketing, research grant bidding and so on (*Personnel Today*, 2013). With the ramping up

of the requirement to demonstrate the efficacy of our research in 'the real world', maybe here – suggested the author, as his contribution to the meeting - was a chance for those of us interested in progressing social justice to lever officially-sanctioned space, in our busy day to day lives, to do more of this sort of work? Others have also pointed to the potential for social good that might come from the REF impact agenda. Pettigrew suggests that it 'encourages connecting with disparate stakeholders and the pursuit of increased human well-being through research', adding that the impact agenda might have greater academic legitimacy than 'defining scholarship just in terms of publication in A-rated scholarly journals' (Pettigrew, 2011: 348, cited in Sayers, 2015).

Notwithstanding the generally limited coverage in social science scholarly journals about the REF and its impact agenda, one productive debate that *has* been had is that between social geographers, Rachel Pain and colleagues and Tom Slater, in the journal *Area* in 2011/2012. Pain and colleagues (2011, 2012) cautiously welcome the REF impact agenda. They are critical human geographers who draw on feminist, socialist and post-colonial theory and practices. Scholars can co-opt the REF impact agenda they argue, for instance, via co-production and the use of participatory methods with less powerful social groups so as to enable research that is politically engaged and directed towards social justice. The authors are aware of the dangers of following the narrow research questions of policy makers and that research can be a prop for the status quo. In the language of governance theory local practices can subvert the demands of REF to disrupt and resist the elite narrative that is the neo-liberalising agenda pursued by universities (Bevir, 2013). Pain and colleagues go as far as to suggest that ignoring the progressive possibilities of the REF impact agenda, and an insistence on the purity of intellectual autonomy, smacks of an 'Ivory Tower' elitism that runs the risk of 'entrenching academics as privileged research technocrats' (2012: 123). Far more contestable and worthy of criticism than 'impact', they say, are the elitist and arcane forms of publishing and academic esteem that REF rewards. Holmwood (2010: 14) describes the sort of position taken by Pain et al as follows: 'most social scientists are motivated by a desire to improve the world and, therefore, the impact agenda can be subtly tweaked to serve *public* social science - in the sense expressed by Burawoy (2005) in his advocacy of public sociology'.

'Fight this cult!' Resisting the REF and problems with 'impact'

The REF impact agenda has also been subject to significant criticism, not least in respect of its technical model of impact. This implies a straightforward, linear process of cause and effect between a research project and subsequent beneficial impacts. Critics question whether research really does have this direct effect, at least with any regularity. Impacts are often diffuse, longer term or nebulous and can arise from the combined and messy influence of several pieces of research (by different universities). And only research that could clearly *demonstrate* and prove its impact (e.g. through citations, user testimonies and so on) is admissible to REF. Significant amounts of government funding has been made available for achieving and demonstrating impact. There are even whole projects 'about' impact, such as the LSE's *Impact of Social Sciences* project[3]. Universities have hired consultants, think tanks and lobby firms so as to improve the impact of their research. However, there has been 'no funding for critically exploring the influence of [the] impact [agenda]. It remains largely unquestioned' (Sayers, 2015). One can add a further, related criticism about the apparent power imbalance at play here. Social policy scholars are regularly admonished for not making their research sufficiently accessible to non-academic 'research users' but there is not a similar level of expectation that those who make social policy should use the research that *is* made available to them.

In the absence of much research literature about impact in social policy, Smith and Stewart (2015, 2016) undertook interviews with social policy researchers, finding that scholars had a 'series of concerns about the impacts of the impact agenda on the way that we work and the decisions that we make about what to study and how to talk about it' (2015). These include worries about: the impossibility of ever really knowing and/ or measuring the true impact of research; the politicisation of the research process, loss of independence and the danger of self-censorship (e.g. sanitising results so as to increase the chances of impact on government); and an a-theoretical model of impact that is detached from the relevant research literature and which therefore ignores the centrality of politics and values in translating research into policy and practice. These concerns were then mapped against a sample of high and low scoring social policy impact case studies with Smith and Stewart concluding that some but not all of academics concerns were warranted (e.g. REF seemed to reify traditional academic elites, with the leads of high scoring submissions predominantly being ethnically white Professors).

At this point we can return to the debate between Pain et al (2012) and Slater (2012) to hear a more belligerent view of REF. For Slater, critical distance and academic freedom are the watchwords; REF signals another turn in the screw of the neo-liberal managerial audit culture. It makes 'universities into factories' that compete 'against each other for scarce resources'. We should 'fight this cult, not welcome it and smooth its rough edges', he says (2012: 117). Slater has a strong pedigree of critical engagement but he is highly suspicious of the idea of impact, which he perceives as being driven by narrow, governmental interests. Academics should set their own questions as an outcome of their intellectual engagement with the world, not have these decided by others. For him, quite counter to the position of Pain and colleagues, engaging with the impact agenda implies collusion with neo-liberalism, not working for social justice. He says:

> ... all forms of academic research, including those involving collaboration with non-academics, are best pursued for reasons worked out by academics in the course of their engagements with knowledge/ignorance and social life, not in the service of an imposed, reductive, compromised, institutionally mediated artificial assessment system that wastes a huge amount of our collective time and effort on a particularly obnoxious navel-gazing exercise rooted in input-output neoclassical economics. (Slater, n.d.).

In a similar vein, 'naive' is the label John Holmwood (2010: 16) applies to those who welcomed the impact agenda as a conduit to public sociology. He is particularly critical of the research councils' 'pathways to impact' approach. This, he says, has forced social scientists to accept government-set strategic objectives, diminished the independence of disciplinary knowledge and set UK research on 'a pathway to mediocrity'. Echoing the same point, Les Back (2015) confesses 'it is embarrassing to remember that some of us - at least initially - thought that "impact" promised the possibility of institutional recognition for public sociology'. Back reviewed the ninety-six 'impact case studies' submitted to the 2014 REF for the discipline of sociology. He concluded that 80 per cent of them present a narrow version of intervention that 'tinkers with minor reforms' and 'that nudges the edges of policy and political influence'. The impact agenda has, he says, 'licensed an arrogant, self-crediting, boastful and narrow disciplinary version of sociology in public'. He concludes that 'this agenda puts us on the side of the political elite, Ministers of State, Job Centre

Managers, Immigration Officers and the apparatchiks of prevailing government policy. Bluntly, it puts us on the side of the powerful'.

A(n) (Impact) Case Study in Failure?

Questions can also be asked about the real extent of the impact claimed in these impact case studies. How much is real and how much is boastful hot air, as implied by Back? The author's own experiences are educative here. The feedback received from HEFCE post-REF2014 meant that it was possible to deduce that the impact case study based on the research conducted by the author and colleagues (entitled *Influencing thinking & shaping practice about worklessness & poverty*) had been awarded the highest, 4* 'world-leading' rating. Of course, this was a welcome outcome but how seriously should we take any of this? The case study argued that as result of the research and the efforts made to 'slay Zombie arguments' that some impact had been had (locally, nationally and internationally) on the political debate about worklessness and welfare and also on the way that practitioners in these fields acted. Evidence included testimonies from practitioners, mentions of the research in Parliament, presentations to select committees and so on.

Yet, within a few months of receiving this official endorsement of the social and political impact of the research, a Conservative government was elected in part on the basis of a campaign that employed exactly those welfare myths that the Teesside research had tried to debunk. It is naive to expect social science research to have clear impact on a general election. A straightforward relationship between research evidence and policy formation is rarely obvious - even with governments that profess an interest in 'what works' (see Monaghan, 2011). It is more plausible that research of this sort – and given all the efforts made toward this end – could have impact *locally*, within Teesside and the North East. Again, there is room for doubt.

For instance, one influential North of England organisation that is tasked with economic regeneration announced a new initiative, in 2015, with a multi-million-pound budget from EU funding, to tackle social exclusion and youth unemployment. Given the extent and academic standing of the Teesside research on exactly these topics – and the efforts of the researchers to make this research known and used locally, including via a Knowledge Exchange Partnership in which this organisation participated, it is not absurd to expect some

possible impact here. Yet the new programme largely ignored this research; the literature
review that launched the scheme did not refer to it and, in fact, offered an analysis that ran
directly counter to findings of the Teesside research. Thus, it proposed to tackle 'social
exclusion' and 'the problem of long-term NEET', and to make unemployed young people
'more work ready' by 'raising their aspirations'. Each of these stated ambitions are
contentious. 'Social inclusion' is not guaranteed by labour market entry. In fact, the
proportions of people locally, in Teesside, who are 'long-term NEET' are tiny, probably less
than 1 per cent of the 18-24 year age group (TVU, 2015). There is little evidence that
unemployment is caused by 'low aspirations'. High rates of graduate un- and
underemployment in Teesside would seem to point to the flaw in this thinking (TVU, 2014).
The emphasis on improving 'work readiness' ignores the failures of existing schemes to do
exactly this; only 8 per cent of long-term unemployed people from Middlesbrough who take
part in the government's 'Work Programme' succeed in finding lasting employment
(Northern Echo, 2013). Overall, the approach of this multi-million pound scheme fails to
appreciate how the problem of youth unemployment in Teesside is, essentially, a problem
of the demand side of the economy (i.e. a deficit in the quantity and quality of employment
and training opportunities) rather than a deficit of the supply side (e.g. young people are
unemployed because they have insufficient aspiration). That locally there are typically 28
applications for every single manufacturing apprenticeship underscores this point (TVU,
2014).

'Fat Cat Sociology' Revisited: the case for critical public social science

The author's experience here would seem to demonstrate the simultaneous failure of the
research to have real impact and the flawed nature of the REF exercise (in that it judged
that impact as 'world leading'). Should we join Les Back, Tom Slater and others in calling for
resistance to the REF, particularly to the 'impact agenda'?

This is a difficult question to answer. One response is pragmatic. Regardless of trenchant
criticisms, it is unlikely that such exercises will disappear from or diminish in significance in
UK academia. Burrows (2012) documents just how widespread and pervasive market-driven
'metric assemblages' (such as REF) have become in the contemporary academy, how
difficult it is to '*not* play the numbers game' and how opportunities for resistance are

unclear. Sayers (2015) concludes his assessment by noting that 'the emphasis on impact is probably likely to grow' and that there is 'no sign of collective revolt'. Furthermore, Smith and Stewart (2015, 2016) have decried the absence of social policy academics in on-going arguments about the impact agenda because theirs would be a particularly expert view. Very importantly, as well, critics of the REF impact agenda can still see some space for more positive, progressive work. In Les Back's critical assessment, around 20 per cent of impact case studies 'showed radical ambition'[4]. He says that:

> in the most appealing and compelling cases, clusters of scholars worked together to try and shift the public agenda through evidence and critical enquiry that challenged conventional thinking... and these examples offer an alternative way to think about how to hold to a public commitment within the current climate[5].

The point here is that even if its critics are correct that the REF *is* primarily an example of the increased neo-liberal control and audit culture of UK higher education, it might *still* provide some room for manoeuvre – for space to engage in a positive, progressive politics of research impact (amidst all the other workload pressures academics face). Local practices can disrupt and re-form how dominant narratives of REF and impact 'are done'. There are, for instance, examples in current sociology of particularly younger, feminist academics trying to find new modes of collaborative practice (inspired by notions of 'punk sociology') that resist the 'present conditions' that 'conjure competition and individualisation among academics' (Jackson, 2016). Thus, *regardless* of our particular perspectives on REF and its impact agenda there is a long-standing tradition of critical social science that seeks to change the world for the better. This too can be drawn on in resisting current elite narratives (for instance, about the so-called underclass or, indeed, that seek to degrade research to research metrics and narrow notions of impact[6]).

One important moment was the famous address of Martin Nicolaus in 1968 to the American Sociological Association conference, attacking 'Fat Cat Sociology': 'the eyes of sociologists, with few but honorable (or honorable but few) exceptions, have been turned downward, and their palms upward. Sociologists stand guard in the garrison and report to their masters on the movements of the occupied populace'. This old radical impetus was given new momentum by Burawoy's important (2005) call *for* public sociology - to be a social scientist

but also to intervene in social life - which returned to the debate in sociology about if, how and the extent to which academics should be engaged in critical, public social science (see McLaughlin et al, 2014 for a recent review). A year earlier than Nicolaus's address, Howard Becker's essay 'Whose Side Are We On?' is even more influential and famous. Both take the position that it is impossible for sociology to be simplistically 'value-free' and 'objective'. Nicolaus's attack on the US sociological establishment was because it implicitly propped up the ruling interests of the US government and the unequal status quo whilst professing 'objectivity'. Similarly, Becker (1967) took the following position: 'the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on'.

Warren and Garthwaite (2015) have returned to these same questions, in the modern context. They say we should recognise that 'research will be on a side' but that it is the credibility, integrity, skill, honesty and craft of the academic enterprise that gives social scientists a place in the now crowded market of experts, pundits, think-tanks and evaluators. Incidentally, that policy formers were looking for 'expertise and wisdom', rather than the hard results of single studies, was also a conclusion from Smith and Stewart's (2015) research about REF impact. In defending the idea of 'public sociology' (in comparison, for instance, to 'professional sociology') Burawoy insists that it must also maintain methodological rigour: 'public sociology cannot be second rate sociology' (Burawoy, 2005: 25; see also McLaughlin et al, 2014). This same stress on combining academic rigour with public engagement was repeated by the British social policy professor, David Donnison, at the 2015 *Social Policy Association Conference*, when he reflected on the diminishing influence of social policy academics on national government, from the 1950s until now[7]. Warren and Garthwaite (2015) conclude by raising questions about who we write for (and one could add *how* and *where* we write, if we seek wider engagement with different audiences) emphasising the importance of academic freedom to the survival of academic research. Only writing so as to satisfy the next assessment 'metric' or to produce sanitised results pleasing to funding bodies threatens this academic integrity and, subsequently, therefore our main public value.

A line can be traced from US sociological concerns about a partisan and public sociology (from Nicolaus and Becker through to Burawoy) to the French critical sociology of Bourdieu and Wacquant. In a short article from 2000, Bourdieu pre-empts the arguments of Warren

and Garthwaite by stressing the need for 'scholarship with commitment' (2000: 40); that scholars can and should act as 'public intellectuals, that is people who invest in a political struggle their specific authority and the values associated with the exercise of their craft, such as the values of disinterestedness and truth'. Ruling ideas get spread in new ways so the need for this committed scholarship increases. Incidentally, Bourdieu's mention here of the role of think tanks in proliferating neo-liberal ideology is met well by Tom Slater's (2014) critique of the *Centre for Social Justice* (a UK right-of-centre think-tank) and its role in 'agnotology'; or the *production* of ignorance and their use of state power to spread mis-information about poverty, unemployment and the need for welfare reform. Slater (2014: 248) shows that the 'structural causes of poverty have been strategically ignored' in favour of the invocation of 'a familiar litany of social pathologies' in order to 'manufacture ignorance of alternative ways of addressing poverty and social injustice'. So, returning to Bourdieu (2000: 44), the challenge for sociological researchers is to transcend the false divide 'between scholarship and commitment, in order to break out of the academic microcosm, to enter into sustained and vigorous exchange with the outside world (especially with unions, grassroots organisations and issue-oriented activist groups)'.

In another short essay, from 2001, Loïc Wacquant adds some meat to this line of argument. He estimates that the social scientific *potential* for critical public engagement has never been greater but the challenges set against us are similarly extensive. In the United States, he says, 'policy research' now 'plays the lead role as a cover and shield against critical thought by acting in the manner of a "buffer" isolating the political field from any research' that is independent or radical in its implications for public policy. Neither has Wacquant any time for the sociological fashion for 'soft culturalism' when in fact we need an historical and materialist analysis to challenge the spread of 19th century forms of poverty, the concerted dismantling by government elites of welfare state 'social safety nets', a class structure that is becoming more rigid and polarized and 'a transnational bourgeoisie' that has gained 'an unprecedented capacity for domination'. 'False thinking and false science have never been so prolix and so omnipresent', he concludes.

This call to arms for a critical, public social science to challenge the dominant myths and modes of thinking of our times is one that is both inspirational and practical. It chimes

exactly with the interests and motivations of the research as set out at the start of this paper; that is, research that questioned and challenged dominant UK myths about work, worklessness and welfare on the basis of a rigorous social science approach that also sought to engage widely with different audiences. Wacquant puts this role like this: 'the primary historical mission of critical thought, [is] to serve as the solvent of doxa – to perpetually question the obviousness and the very frames of civic debate so as to give ourselves the chance to think the world'. It is difficult to imagine a more doxic set of false thinking than that embedded in the idea that there are 'families where three generations have never worked' and that unemployment in the UK can be explained by 'cultures of worklessness'. Yet these *are* 'the frames of civic debate', shared across political parties that seek to separate out the deserving from the undeserving poor, the 'shirkers' from the 'strivers', and in so doing divert attention away from the real causes and experiences of poverty and unemployment.

Summary and Conclusion

The first part of the paper described research undertaken by the author and colleagues about working-class people's experiences of unemployment and economic marginality. The research challenged elite narratives about 'cultures of worklessness' that have become popular with politicians and the general public and which, under the name of austerity, have been used by government as the basis for swingeing cuts to the UK's welfare state provision. The influence and resilience of underclass theories provides a perfect example of how an elite narrative can become taken-for-granted, common-sense. These ideas have been likened to Zombies; they keep coming back to life no matter how many times researchers try to kill them off. Thus, ironically given the focus of this paper, they also provide a perfect example of how notions of social science 'research impact' can be Pollyanna-ish and simplistic: social scientists have, over decades, repeatedly and successfully demonstrated the falsity of underclass ideas yet they continue to be the basis of much government thinking and policy.

The paper then considered new systems for research governance in the UK (which are also present in other countries), specifically the Research Excellence Framework and its 'impact agenda', identifying positions 'for' and 'against'. In terms of the latter, it certainly can be

regarded as another tightening of the neo-liberal, managerial audit culture that infests universities. There is clearly an elite narrative at work here that has succeeded in governing the day to day practices and longer-term goals and orientations of social scientists in the UK. Consequently, speaking of sociology, Les Back (2015) says that 'the "impact agenda" is coming to constitute our self-understanding, guide our decisions around job appointments, and...limit[ing] the public ambition of our discourse'. The genealogy of this is rooted historically in governmental calls for greater accountability in respect of returns on public investment, anti-intellectual suspicions about the activities and 'value for money' of university academics and the growing marketisation, commodification and privatisation of universities and academic life. The foundational premise is that academics, in return for research funding, increasingly must demonstrate their value to economy and society. Impact, as championed by REF and the research councils, threatens the imposition of official governmental policy priorities that limit academic freedom and narrow research agendas. Certainly, too, the realities of impact can be ephemeral or over-stated, even when judged by the REF to be of the highest calibre, as was demonstrated in respect of the effects of the Teesside research. Increasingly, to adapt Wacquant's phrase, the REF sets the 'the very frames of debate' about what constitutes 'good research'. Thus, REF and the wider impact agenda do have the potential to *limit* critical, radical social science (one clear and simple route to this is if social policy impact becomes narrowed down to impact government policy; a rare enough possibility even when governments claim an interest in evidence-based policy making).

Some critics would hold that even 'playing the REF game' adds legitimacy to a corrupt and corrupting system. This may be true but it is *also* possible to conclude, however, that REF and its impact agenda carry opportunities for progressive social science. Pragmatic matters shouldn't be underestimated. 'Impact activities' are increasingly allowed - demanded - in otherwise constrained academic workloads. This gives institutional space and valorisation for engaged, critical public social science (of the sort attempted from the Teesside projects). And as Sayers (2015) puts it, 'pursuing impact can be more than slavish adherence to imposed priorities'; Back saw at least some positive cases of this in his review. In the absence of collective opposition, pragmatism and the even small possibilities presented by 'playing the REF game' should not be dismissed. Smith and Stewart (2016) conclude that

possibilities remain for social policy academics to enter this debate more vigorously and to draw on our own theory and research so as to better influence relationships between research(ers) and policy (makers).

Of course, social scientists are unlikely to engage in critical, public social science *because* of the REF and its impact agenda (it is unlikely that Nicolaus, Becker, Bourdieu and Wacquant would be fans). The imperative is much deeper set than that – but REF can *potentially* help to enable it. The drive to confront dominant ideologies, to attack inequalities and to work for social justice has a long history in social science and there has only been space to mention a few important contributions. Victories can be few, small, easily reversed and sometimes hard to see at all. To wave the white flag, to retreat to the comfort of the ivory tower and to become lost in the labour of papers for arcane scholarly journals can be tempting. At such moments, as Henry Giroux warns us, we must resist this 'debilitating pessimism' and 'the politics of cynicism' (2006: 13, 7). In describing 'critical pedagogy' and the responsibilities of the public intellectual, Giroux echoes Wacquant's (2001) emphasis on the politically and sociologically transcendental possibilities of critical thought:

> Even if the forces of domination and oppression seem insurmountable and the possibility of progressive social change invisible, we must retain a 'language of possibility' that allows us to 'think in terms of the "not yet", to speak the unrepresentable, and to imagine future social relations outside of the existing configuration of power (Giroux, 2006, 7).

This is Giroux's challenge, and rallying cry, to those of us who seek progressive social change from the Left. To finish, and perhaps to underline the potential that Bourdieu, Wacquant, Giroux and others allude to in their calls for a critical, public sociology that works against the current state of things, it can be noted that 'they', on the political Right, have long understood this same message. Giroux's statement finds its almost exact match, some decades earlier, in Milton Friedman's (1962/ 1982: xiv) view on the political function of his writings on free-market economics:

> Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.....That, I believe, is

our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive

and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

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NOTES

[1] See http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/Results.aspx?val=macdonald%20teesside
[2] For example, by appointing staff with strong research profiles for short periods only (on fractional contracts) or re-designating others as 'teaching only' staff so removing them from the count.
[3] See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/
[4] Back examined: i) how closely the case study was linked to the user's interest, ii) whether the case study challenged sociologically the terms of the problem, and iii) whether there was reference to critical questioning of the issues' wider societal dimensions (Back, 2016, personal communication).
[5] Incidentally, and in a nutshell, this is what our case study *attempted* (Back will not have reviewed ours because we submitted it to the Social Policy not the Sociology REF panel).
[6] For example, see the resistance by staff and unions to Newcastle University's 'Raising the Bar' performance management regime (https://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/nick.megoran/HTML/rtb.html and http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/newcastle-university-professors-set-refuse-11400473).
[7] Coincidentally, one target of his ire was the ideological, evidence-free nonsense peddled by government about families where 'three generations have never worked' (i.e. the exact focus of the author's research).