

Introduction to a discussion on the third cohesion report: Policy-relevant research and research-relevant policy

Christer Bengts

Editor-in-Chief

The European Journal of Spatial Development

The two categories of academic and applied research seem to be the concrete token of an increased intermingling between the world of politics and that of science. In this unholy alliance, the money-power is pushing for policy-relevance while researchers struggle for their academic credibility. In what follows, these dramas will be commented upon as will the newly issued third cohesion report from the European Commission. Though the current situation may seem confusing the only way to sort things out is to grab the bull by its horns and start a discussion.

Academic research and applied research

Sometimes research is divided into two distinct categories: *academic research* (generated within the academic community in accordance with the inherent logic of science) and *applied research* (commissioned by instances outside the academic community for practical benefit). A conventional view of the difference between these two categories seems to be that academic research is supposed to be theoretical and hard or impossible to apply in practice while applied research is supposed to produce knowledge of practical use and theoretical insignificance. Now, I do think such a view is quite simplistic. Good research, regardless of its origin or degree of applicability, is always based on concurrent theoretical understanding. As such, the applicability of research results is not an antipode to a theory-relevant approach.

In my own experience of applied research, which spans a period of some thirty years, I have had to cogitate over the nature of external research commissions more than once. Financers of applied research would as a rule neither bring up the question of to what extent a research commission is theoretically founded, nor the relationship between theory and method. In fear of being utilised, they are, however, conscious not to finance academic research as part of a commission. They want to have useful results for themselves. This usually implies that the financer has a rather clear picture of the foreseen conclusions, which are definitively not going to be critical (of the financer in particular) but should support some particular interest of knowledge. Consequently, the difference between academic and applied research does not lie in the extent of its theoretical approach but in the degree of criticism. The commissioner of applied research, for instance a senior civil servant, would have a clear picture of what he/she wants. Actually the lack of such a picture could render allegations against the civil servant of being uninformed or incompetent.

Public administration is a huge commissioner and financer of applied research. With the ongoing change in the nature of public administration from controller and director (government) to the mere steward of various development strategies (governance), so-called policy-relevant research is now in constant demand. New policies and advanced governance requires new indicators, criteria, monitoring, documentation, cartography, etc. At its best, such research is potent enough to supply the governing

sector with the advanced means that they are looking for. Much of the time, however, the results of applied research are insignificant due to the limited self-interest of the commissioner. I feel ashamed to concede my guild in this respect: much of our so-called policy-relevant research is pure nonsense, and actually it is not even 'policy-relevant' in the face of factual development needs. Judged by the reactions of the ex-academic world, my most 'policy-relevant' research has been my academic research, because it has been critical in nature and thus has perhaps opened up the issues in question to new perspectives.

To conclude, research *for* let us say spatial development and planning may be useful in a very narrow sense of the word, but only research *about* spatial development and planning opens up an understanding of such activities in a broader context. It is hard to imagine that research *for* planning could even be successful in the long run without complementary research *about* planning.

Two different worlds

In the concept 'policy-relevant research' two worlds seem to merge: those of politics and of science. This is an uneasy fusion because the two worlds are very different from each other. Indeed, they are perhaps even contradictory in many respects.

Often politics is defined as 'the conduct of public affairs', and sometimes this definition is extended with the words '...for private benefit'. Whatever may be the case, in politics the scope of interest is the future. Reality is interesting only in so far as it contributes to the sought-after picture of the future. Thus in politics, matters are discussed in terms of 'ought to be'. The means of pursuing ones goals is power, which can be based on pure force or on persuasion. The method of convincing referred to here is that of rhetoric.

Contrary to politics, science substitutes future for reality and 'ought to be' for 'is' based on evidence. Scientific results gain legitimacy neither by force nor by the formal status of the person presenting scientific arguments. It is the weight of arguments in their own right, that is, rationality, which forms the foundation of science. The meaning of science is not in the first place to convince and persuade people but to accumulate knowledge by applying academic procedures, which suffice for the control of knowledge accumulation. Science resembles democracy in the sense that the content is completely open but the forms are defined.

Politics

Future
'Ought to be'
Power
Persuasion
Rhetoric

Science

Reality
'Is'
Rationality
Accumulation of knowledge
Academic procedure

Figure 1. The two worlds of politics and science

It may be instructive to consider politics and science in terms of rhetoric and academic procedure more in detail. Rhetoric could be conceived in a variety of ways. Let me just point out its traditional meaning of eloquence, that is persuasion as an integrated part of politics since Antiquity.¹ In a broader sense rhetoric is an analytical

method for literary critique or for the analysis of any social processes where communication is involved, which of course means it is a general means for interpreting social contexts. In this latter meaning it is connected to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in social sciences according to which reality is a linguistic construct.² As communication, science is of course profoundly rhetorical in character.³ Let us, however, stick to the narrower definition of rhetoric as a major means for political persuasion in contrast to academic procedures.

Consider language and argumentation: in rhetoric the language is vague in order to suit the many and to avoid negative reactions. The language of science should on the contrary be as precise and well defined as possible. In politics argumentation is left open because there must always be room for adjustments while scientific argumentation is defined. Scientific arguments are based on alleged facts while rhetoric must be based on a common understanding, that is, common ‘truths’. The orator has to embrace his audience from a common platform. Although rhetoric is vague and open, the context and audience is always a particular one. In science, despite its precise language and defined argumentation, the context is general as invariance is sought for. With regard to rationality, science sticks to the logical (*logos*) while rhetoric widens the scope to embrace logic as well as devotion and ethics (*logos, pathos, ethos*).

| | <u>Rhetoric</u> | <u>Academic procedures</u> |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Language: | vague | precise |
| Argumentation: | open | defined |
| Basis: | ‘truths’ | facts |
| Context: | particular | general |
| Rationality: | logos, pathos, ethos | logos |

Figure 2. The character of rhetoric and academic procedures

The relationship between power and knowledge is defined by Francis Bacon’s (1561-1626) famous statement: knowledge is power.⁴ If we define politics as power and science as knowledge, the proposition of Bacon would mean that those in power are heavily depending on the control of knowledge, which is a state of affairs that everybody applying for research grants has to realise. But the whole matter can be turned the other way around: power is (defines) knowledge. Those in power are the ones that by definition are in the position to define what counts as knowledge in every single case.

In an insightful study, Bent Flyvbjerg has investigated the rationality of planning in relation to the rationality of power in the town of Aalborg in Denmark.⁵ According to Flyvbjerg, power defines rationality. Power concerns itself with defining reality rather than with discovering what reality really is. In so doing, power creates concrete physical, economic, ecological and social “realities”. In the defined context, power then defines what counts as rationality and relevant knowledge. In politics the golden rule of rhetoric is much used: necessity is the best argument. Based on a description of reality where only one solution is possible, particular interests gain credibility. In politics the audience ‘has to’ understand, see, realise, etc., because of the necessity implicit in the constructed ‘reality’.

The greater the power, the less rationality there seems to persist. Historically speaking, rationality has often been the last refuge of the powerless, but in open

conflict rationality yields to power. Interaction between power and rationality tends, however, to stabilise power relations and often actually to constitute them. There is considerable power embedded in the privilege to define a discourse and to conduct it, and to define the agenda for research institutions and scientific discussion, in short, to define the context where power turns out to be convincing and persuasive. The EU does not rule only by directives, but by shaping the agenda as well.

Policy-relevant research

Political discourses revolve around a core of slogans that are formulated in order to gain support for various endeavours. When particular political slogans gain extraordinary popularity, they occupy the agenda of any serious discussion, and they constitute a challenge that all political parties have to address. Political correctness is defined. Examples of such slogans are ‘democracy’, ‘development’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘equality’. Is there any political party of significance in any European country that would announce itself to be against democracy, sustainable development or equality? I doubt it. What the different parties in each case actually mean with these words is however an entirely different matter.

From a rhetorical point of view, political slogans are used because they are helpful in constituting the *ethos* of the speaker and they contribute to the *pathos* of the speech. The force of political slogans lies in their positive connotations: they lend their *imago* to the speech and to the speaker. They are, however, vague and general, but this is exactly the reason why they are so useful in politics. They give room for practically any political action and allow for various parties to form pacts and find compromises under general headings. Slogans are useful in politics because they are non-committing. A derivation of all of this is that slogans are non-analytical as well: they are labels of action but not tools for analysis.

If political slogans remained as slogans they would be of little harm or interest to the scientific community. They would perhaps be the object of research, but would not readily enter social theory in the disguise of analytical tools. The current situation however, sees the scientific community drawn into politics through the request to produce ‘policy-relevant research’ on the basis of political slogans. Concepts that used to be vague, general and non-analytical are now supposed to materialise into criteria, indicators and models. The bid that researchers receive from bureaucrats reads: ‘Give us tools to make these important concepts (sustainable development, poly-centricity, urban-rural relations, cohesion, etc) operational!’

Slogans in Politics

Positive connotations

Vague and general

Non-analytical

Concepts in Research

Value relative to defined criteria

Defined in precise context

Analytical

Picture 3. Political slogans and research concepts

The desires of the political world place science in an awkward position. In order to attain analytical strength, concepts must of course be deprived of their value (they are not ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as such) except for their analytical strength. They must be clearly defined in a precise context as well. What then happens is that the previous political slogans are deprived of their factual virtues politically. This in turn is reflected in the uneasy manner that bureaucrats address ‘policy-relevant’ research results. To their

mind, they always seem to be too particular, too narrow and too complicated. ‘What are the policy implications?’ they would ask as a rule. Perhaps however the task is impossible in itself? The logics of the two worlds are in essence completely different: the scientific proceeding of analysis from the precise and the specified to the general simply collides with the political need for the labelling of particular connections to various interests. In the EU, this problem seems to be aggregated due to the huge territorial scale where the political demand for simplicity clashes with the scientific demand for a meaningful (and useful!) hierarchy of scales in any spatial investigation.

The third cohesion report

The political world could be characterised in a twofold way: on the one hand political slogans are extremely broad and vague, on the other hand the context of political application is always particular and narrow, and usually related to the allocation of resources. In modern society, most matters seem to be made operational in solely economic terms. For instance ‘development’ is in a political context usually boiled down such that it equates to ‘economic growth’, or even further narrowed to indicate the ‘growth of effective demand’. Spatial ‘cohesion’ seems to stand for the levelling of economic growth between given territories. Even ‘social cohesion’ gains a purely economic meaning when ‘social’ is used as a substitute for labour markets in terms of the activity rate of the potential labour force, or the share of females, etc.

Let us then have a look at the summary of the third cohesion report.⁶ Here Europe is described in terms of regional disparities with regard to GDP and economic growth as well as labour productivity and activity rates. Some regions are thought to lag behind because of structural weaknesses such as low productivity, low employment and social exclusion. Here ‘social exclusion’ gains a meaning in a purely economic context by being attached to low productivity and low employment. Some regions, however, do not show so-called structural weaknesses, a matter that causes conceptual difficulties. This is solved in the report by referring to ‘deficient innovative capacity’ in regions with low performance but reasonable structural capacity. As the degree of innovative capacity can only be proved in connection to economic performance, the hermeneutic circle is closed and the argumentation becomes essentially self-referential. The report as such advocates the need to strengthen the structural capacity of lagging regions and to improve their innovative capacity as the solution to such problems.

With reference to academic standards, the summary of the third cohesion report is of course very weak. The first footnote refers to a study that was published 17 years ago while the second footnote refers to ‘an independent high-level study group’, which is the kind of reference that would never be accepted in an academic thesis. But why should we get lost in academic trifles? Why not judge the report according to what it is, that is, as a political document? If we do that we can proceed by making some judgements concerning the interpretation of ‘cohesion’ and the validity of proposed solutions. We could also proceed with an analysis of the rhetoric employed in the report, which would shed some light on the manner arguments are presented in a presumably persuasive way.

Let us start by having a look at the interpretation of ‘cohesion’. As stated above, ‘cohesion’ and ‘social cohesion’ are defined within the realm of economics. Furthermore, the discussion on cohesion is stripped of almost any other types of

meaning, which makes the whole argumentation cycle extremely self-referential. One is forced to ask oneself: how can the economy of lagging regions be strengthened if we have no clues as to the factual political, social, cultural and natural context where each region is ‘lagging’, or if we have no understanding of the complicated relationships between various factors influencing economic performance except for a residual parameter called ‘innovative capacity’?

With respect to rhetoric, the report shows a clear-cut strategy: we need economic growth, therefore we need cohesion, and we need cohesion, therefore we need growth. As economic growth is the overall aim in any political context, and the fundament of modern society, it is clear that the demand for cohesion gains strength by being connected to economic growth. From a scientific point of view it is, however, doubtful whether there would be a causal relation (cohesion generates growth or growth generates cohesion) or even a correlation between economic growth and cohesion. With reference to the business cycle, booms seem to generate concentration rather than cohesion and slumps seem to be accompanied by a more dispersed pattern of resource allocation.⁷ Rhetoric that generates doubts with regard to the scientific basis of a proposition is thus not very convincing. In today’s world then, insufficient scientific proof is simply bad rhetoric.

No argument is stronger than necessity. Therefore politicians always start their lamentations by telling us what we ‘must’ understand or do. This ‘must’ gains credibility by being situated into a context where there is only one reasonable alternative for action. The political subjects are then free to draw their own (and only) conclusion. A critical view of the third cohesion report would imply a broadening up of many of the topics presented in the report. Is the ‘Europe’ sketched in the report the only possible one, or could there be alternative and broader pictures of Europe? Should ‘cohesion’ be limited to economic growth in terms of effective demand or could there be other ways of defining the basis for a good and materially secure life? If an increase in female activity rate causes a decline in nativity, why should we try to increase the activity rate? If there are no prospects for an increase in nativity, why is ex-European immigration not discussed in European policy documents as the only realistic alternative to increased nativity? What are the possibilities for European politics if ‘deficient innovative capacity’ is a culturally determined factor? What is the function of science in the political context of cohesion – and what should it not be?

Concluding remarks

When representatives of the European Commission urge European research communities to take part in ‘policy-relevant research’ they should be aware of the fact that they are essentially asking for the impossible. Policy-relevance is determined in the world of politics, but research is produced in the sphere of science. This is a state of affairs that neither the political world nor research institutions can do much about. When policy-relevance is increased by non-academic pressure, academic credibility is ultimately the loser. With it goes the rhetorical surplus provided by science. The demand for policy-relevant research is on the upsurge and many research institutions across Europe specialise in such activity. Success presupposes, however, academic credibility as a kind of cultural capital that can be easily wasted along the road.

But why should the right to assess be a prerogative of politics? Why not turn the notion of policy-relevant research on its head by demanding research relevant

policies? The evaluator would then be the scientific community and the subject of assessment would be the political world and its various undertakings including development strategies. Is there such a thing as a rational politics? This we can find out only by carrying out research *about* politics, not only *for* politics.

Noter

¹ Cicero 1981; Cicero 2001; Quintilianus 2001

² Hellspong 2001

³ Lundberg 2001

⁴ Bacon 2000

⁵ Flyvbjerg 1998

⁶ European Commission 2004

⁷ This pattern seems to occur on all territorial scales, internationally and inter-regionally as well as intra-regionally.

References

Bacon, F. (2000) *The new organon*. Cambridge University Press.

Cicero, M.T. (2001) *De oratore. Cicero on the ideal orator*. Oxford University Press.

Cicero, M.T. (1981) *Cicero in twenty-eight volumes. Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Harvard University Press.

European Commission (2004) *A new partnership for cohesion: convergence competitiveness cooperation. Third report on economic and social cohesion*.

Flyvbjerg, B. (1998) *Rationality and Power: democracy in practice*. University of Chicago Press.

Hellspong, L. (2001) ”Retoriken och den moderna vetenskapen.” From Johannesson, K. 2001. *Vetenskap och retorik*. Natur och Kultur, pages 13 – 28.

Lundberg, B. (2001) ”Retorik och idéhistoria.” From Johannesson, K. 2001. *Vetenskap och retorik*. Natur och Kultur, pages 169 – 193.

Quintilianus, M.F. (2001) *The orator's education*. Harvard University Press.

Stockholm, March 2004