

# 'Impact', 'value' and 'bad economics': Making sense of the problem of value in the arts and humanities

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## Abstract

Questions around the value of the arts and humanities to the contemporary world and the benefits they are expected to bring to the society that supports them through funding have assumed an increased centrality within a number of disciplines, not limited to humanities scholarship. Especially problematic, yet crucial, is the issue of the measurement of such public value. This article takes as a starting point a discussion of the 'cultural value debate' as it has developed within British cultural policy: here, the discussion of 'value' has been inextricably linked to the challenge of 'making the case' for the arts and for public cultural funding. The paper discusses the problems with the persisting predominance of economics in shaping current approaches to framing articulations of 'value' in the policy-making context. It concludes with a plea for a collaborative effort to resist the economic doxa, and to reclaim and reinvent the impact agenda as a route towards the establishment of new public humanities.

## Keywords

Arts policy, economics rhetoric, higher education (HE) policy, impact agenda, public humanities

Questions around the value of the arts and humanities to the contemporary world have assumed an increased centrality within a number of fields of practice and disciplines, not limited to humanities scholarship. A critical issue has been the public benefits they are expected to bring in return for societal support through

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dedicated institutions and funding. This in turn raises the problematic yet crucial issue of the measurement of such public value in the context of an ostensible commitment to evidence-based policy making. This article takes as a starting point a discussion of the ‘cultural value debate’ as it developed within British cultural policy practice and research. In this context, discussions of ‘value’ have become inextricably linked to the challenge of ‘making the case’ for the arts to justify public cultural funding given increasing funding pressures facing public service provision, especially in the West.

These pressures are not limited to publicly subsidised arts and culture, of course, but need to be understood as the more general outcome of rising expectations of the range, quality and availability of public services somewhat out of step with public willingness to adequately finance those services through general taxation (Flinders, 2012). Present austerity measures, adopted in several countries across the West in response to the fallout of the global financial crisis, have only amplified the pressures and anxieties facing governments to justify public spending on anything. In the UK, the post-2008 climate of financial austerity and the extensive funding cuts driving the widespread need for the ‘restructuring’ of key cultural organisations have only sharpened the urgency of attempts to articulate value in policy debates. This pragmatic need to articulate public value in ways that might ensure the arts’ financial sustainability, however, predates the current financial dire straits. Over time, it has resulted in the development, within arts policy, of an often questionable rhetoric of the arts’ ‘socio-economic impact’, and their role in local development (especially culture-led urban regeneration) as a Finance Ministry-friendly rationale for continued support.

### **Cultural value versus impact: The issue**

A point worth clarifying is that what makes the impact rhetoric questionable, I would argue, is not its explicit rejection of equally questionable notions of ‘art for art’s sake’, as maintained by arts militants such as John Tusa (1999, 2007). Rather, it is the narrow and technocratic scope that ‘impact’ has acquired in policy thinking and practice. The notion that the arts can have transformative effects at both the individual and societal level has a very long history, in equal measure noble and ignoble (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). This is also a history that importantly sees the question of the effects of aesthetic expression and reception as central to forms of intellectual activism linked to theories of the good society (although of course, one ideologue’s good society may well be another’s hell – such are the dangers of ideology!). What makes these recent discourses of arts’ socio-economic impact problematic is their rootedness in the need to instrumentally comply with public audit practices to garner legitimacy for demands over the public purse (irrespective of whether they, in fact, promote or merely muddle issues of transparency, democratic accountability and effectiveness). The problem is not attributing social value to aesthetic expression and experience for their perceived desirable effects: after all, this form of instrumentality is exactly as old as the creation and enjoyment of

artistic expression itself (see Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). The problem, rather, lies in the way in which the attribution of value to the outcome of aesthetic encounters has become part of the technocratic machinery of cultural policy-making. A similar argument can be made for arts and humanities research, and therefore a distinction needs to be made between value and impact.

In the UK, the Research Councils (including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)) define impact as ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’. The benefits that are delivered via this impact are further broken down as ‘fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom’, ‘increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy’, and ‘enhancing quality of life, health and creative output’ (AHRC, n.d.). These categories are quite broad, but the economic element is noticeably predominant, and indeed the point is explicitly made that that ‘this definition accords with the Royal Charters of the Councils and with HM Treasury guidance on the appraisal of economic impact’ (AHRC, n.d.). It seems clear, then, that as far as a key public funder of humanities research is concerned, the public benefits that the humanities ought to deliver map quite closely onto official government priorities: economic growth and aid to policy-making being quite high up on the agenda. Whilst it might be argued that the above-mentioned ‘impact goals’ are legitimate ones for research paid for by the public purse, they also represent a particular, pragmatic and economically inflected articulation of what makes the humanities of value to the public, which highlights economic profitability over other benefits.

There are in fact other ways in which it can be argued – and indeed it *has* been argued – that the humanities are of value to individuals and societies, which tend to have a broader scope and ambition. Helen Small has conveniently provided a taxonomy of the principal claims made, over history, for the value of the humanities in her latest book, *The Value of the Humanities* (2013). Small (2013: 3) identifies ‘five arguments for the value of humanities that have been influential historically and that still have persuasive power’. These arguments are: that the humanities study a culture’s meaning-making practices via methods of interpretation and evaluation, which rely on and embrace subjectivity; that the humanities are valuable precisely because they question and problematize the kind of utilitarian logic expressed in the definition of impact we have just looked at, that is, ‘the prioritization of economic usefulness and the means of measuring it’ (2013: 4); that the humanities can help us better understand what happiness is and how it might be achieved; that the humanities have an important contribution to make to the quality of our democratic societies (what Small calls the ‘Democracy Needs Us’ argument popularised, in the US, by prominent figures such as Martha Nussbaum and Geoffrey Harpham); finally, that the humanities ‘matter for their own sake’ (2013: 6) – this a claim that, Small rightly acknowledges, can easily get lost in the intellectual *cul de sac* that is the concept of ‘intrinsic value’. It is impossible here to provide an extensive discussion of the way in which Small traces the origin and development of each of these arguments from their roots in the Victorian age

(if not earlier) to the present day. However, Small's taxonomy, even in my most basic presentation, still points to an understanding of the humanities' value that pushes beyond ideas of utility and usefulness of the sort that have become inscribed in the notion of 'impact' adopted by research funding bodies, to encompass broader, more complex and more wide ranging ideas of how the humanities may benefit its scholars and society. It is precisely the tension between the narrower, more pragmatic and economically minded 'impact' that dominates HE policy discourse and the idea of the multiple, different ways in which the humanities can generate 'value' for the public that is the concern of this paper. For both the arts and the scholarly humanities, 'impact' as defined in policy discourse is part of what makes them valuable; yet, arguably, there is more to value than impact, and we risk focusing on the latter at the expense of a full understanding of the former.

### Value, impact and the problem of justification

The point at which this tension between value and impact becomes especially evident is where the question of justification is concerned. As Helen Small (2013: 1) observes, 'the particular form of justification that involves articulating reasons why we should consider the higher study of the humanities (university teaching and research) a public good is a modern undertaking, driven by institutional, political, and economic pressures'. Similarly, the fact that arts and culture spending accounts for a tiny – indeed one might say microscopic<sup>1</sup> – percentage of overall public spending in most countries is (rightly) irrelevant to the general principles of accountability and transparency that dominate contemporary policy-making processes – or at least the surrounding rhetoric (cf. Molas-Gallart, 2015; Benneworth, 2015). Whilst special pleading for the arts can never be justified, I would nevertheless question whether transparency, accountability and openness in decision-making are really the outcome of an increasing governmental reliance on auditing practices (cf. Belfiore 2004, 2009). In *The Audit Society*, Michael Power (1997) makes a compelling case for interpreting these auditing practices as 'rituals of verification', more concerned with procedural compliance than genuinely guaranteeing effectiveness and transparency. Furthermore, auditing, performance measurement and evaluation are central to 'econocratic' decision-making approaches – following Self (1975: 5), I here refer to the blind and often ideologically disingenuous reliance on 'the belief that there exist fundamental economic tests or yardsticks according to which policy decisions can and should be made, and that cost-benefit analysis and cognate econometric methods are the best form of such tests'.

My basic argument is therefore as follows: I will attempt to show that there are interesting parallels between the value debate unfolding since the late 1980s in the arts and culture regarding sectoral policy-making, especially its reliance on 'impact' as a proxy for 'value', and more recent developments in HE policy. Despite an explicit focus on the case of English cultural and education policy, many of the points raised clearly have a broader salience. This is partly on account of the international influence of the British (and especially English) models of cultural

policy and HE, but also because many of the phenomena discussed are caused by, or are part of, broader global trends and pressures, and hence may well resonate beyond narrow national confines.

My discussion focuses on problems deriving from the persisting intellectual dominance of a narrow instrumental rationality with a distinctive economic flavour in framing value discussions in both the arts and HE. As a cultural policy scholar with an interest in arts impact evaluation, I was struck by a strange sense of *déjà vu* as the ‘impact agenda’ debate developed within the British HE system, as a result of two seemingly technical but nevertheless important changes. The first was the inclusion of ‘impact’ as a UK Research Councils funding assessment criterion, and the second was its introduction as a new research quality assessment heading within the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). There is neither space here to describe and explain in detail the nature, aims and problematic aspects of the REF, the new British model of countrywide university research quality assessment, nor for a full blown meta-critique of UK academic responses to the ‘impact’ agenda in general, and in the Arts and Humanities in particular (see e.g. Brewer, 2013; Collini, 2012; Docherty, 2011; Holmwood, 2011). My point is that the rhetoric of impact, having burst into formal government mechanisms for assessing research quality, deciding on public research funding allocations and regulating the main public research grant-giving bodies, has rapidly acquired a centrality to British academic life unthinkable a decade ago.

As a policy rationale and legitimisation strategy, ‘impact’ is a temptation hard to resist. On a practical level, it might appear to offer an appealing justification for funding aimed at an unsympathetic Treasury department. Yet using impact as a proxy for value opens up a range of problems for humanities research, namely:

- a. pragmatic - how to engineer and then measure convincingly the impact that is being claimed, promised or expected?<sup>2</sup>
- b. conceptual: what do we actually mean when we suggest that research might – or indeed even ought to – have an ‘impact’ beyond the academy?
- c. political: who ought to have the right to decide what counts as desirable impact?
- d. ethical: is the expectation of predictable impact, which is often meant to refer to impact on policy or the economy, a desirable or even legitimate *expectation* for academic research? Does this create tensions with the key academic principles of freedom and autonomy?<sup>3</sup>

Doing justice to these issues’ complexity is here impossible.

However, whilst impact is a concept that needs to be troubled, questioned, challenged and possibly redefined (or, my personal preference, discarded in favour of the active and two-way public engagement of researchers with diverse non-academic constituencies), it does relate to the pertinent and under-discussed broader issue of what might be universities’ contemporary role. The idea of impact – for arts and culture, as well as for the academic humanities – cannot be simply

dismissed as an unreasonable capriciousness on the part of politicians and funding bodies that should be staunchly resisted *tout court*. The ‘impact agenda’ discourse raises interesting and important questions, such as what should be the point, the use, the aim and indeed the value, of the research produced within the academy. This is particularly important for arts and humanities research where the ultimate outcome of that research is not immediately visible in the shape of illnesses cured, vaccines created, tsunamis and natural disasters averted, or new inventions brought to market (cf. Benneworth, 2015). ‘Impact’ is important precisely because its very flaws remind us that there is a whole set of important (and appropriate) questions that do not always get the attention they deserve.

As a believer in the idea of university as a public institution (irrespective of funding arrangements),<sup>4</sup> and as a scholar precisely specialising in debunking impact, I am troubled by the contempt poured on the impact agenda. I am concerned that what may lurk beneath some of these attacks on impact might be an unwarranted sense of academic entitlement and interested self-protection. The impression is that some academics might be seeking to resist outside pressures on their work, often including the clearly legitimate demands that a liberal and democratic society properly makes of its university researchers to be at the beating heart of our contemporary public sphere. Impact is problematic in many ways, as I shall soon elaborate, warranting the rejection of its present form as an inadequate single proxy for value that contributes to growing pressures to commodify knowledge creation and academic expertise. What is needed here, then, is a different, more helpful (though surely also difficult and challenging) frame to try and articulate why the arts and humanities may or may not be of value to the society that nurtures (and sometimes funds) them. Drawing on the conceptual distinction outlined earlier, we need to shift current debate, and crucially current practice, from a focus on ‘impact’ alone (as it has come to be understood within policy circles) to a broader concern with public value in its multifaceted manifestations (of which ‘impact’ is but one).

## The defensive nature of instrumentalism

I have suggested that an interesting parallel can be drawn between debates around value and impact as they have developed in the (subsidised) arts and cultural sector and in the academic humanities. This parallel centres on the common development of two seemingly contradictory discourses. The first revolves around a distinct sense of beleaguerment (which began in the mid-1980s for the UK arts sector, but dates back much further in the academic humanities, at least to the 1960s).<sup>5</sup> The second is a result of the increasing expectations placed on both the arts and the humanities by the rhetoric of impact, which attributes to them quantifiable transformational powers in a range of disparate areas. Interestingly, these parallel discourses of crisis and doom on the one hand, great expectations on the other have

developed in parallel and are, I will argue, tightly interconnected, as counter-intuitive as this might seem.

My contention here is that the rhetoric of impact, which began as a set of conditions from government, policy-makers and, crucially, funders for financial support, flourished because it came to be seen (at the very least by universities' management) as a way to react to the long-standing feeling of crisis that has afflicted the humanities over a period of at least 60 years. In this view, 'impact' and its underlying instrumental rationality are embraced (or at least grudgingly accepted) as a key element in a defensive strategy: 'impact' has taken both the cultural sector and academia by storm because it appears to offer a rhetorically powerful articulation of value and an attendant rationale for funding, critically able to win the approval of a Treasury department set on cutting public expenditure. In the arts, this point was made in April 2013 quite transparently and straightforwardly by the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Maria Miller, in a speech at the British Museum. Poignantly entitled 'Testing times: Fighting culture's corner in an age of austerity', the speech's purpose was clearly spelt out as a request to the sector 'to help me reframe the argument [for public funding]: to hammer home the value of culture to our economy'. This is necessary, she continued, because 'in an age of austerity, when times are tough and money is tight, our focus must be on culture's economic impact'.

At the heart of this definition of impact, supported by a number of impact statistics (although without any indication of their provenance) is 'the argument that culture is central to bringing about growth' (Miller, 2013). The speech's title makes apparent the defensive nature of this 'hammering home' of the economic value of the arts and culture, a constant theme throughout the speech itself:

To maintain the argument for continued public funding, we must make the case as a two-way street. We must demonstrate the healthy dividends that our investment continues to pay. (Miller, 2013)

'Maintaining the argument' is especially difficult in times of austerity and – as was the case when the speech was delivered – amidst a comprehensive spending review, which eventually apportioned substantial funding cuts across public services. Miller's defensive strategy thus emphasises a narrowly instrumental and economic rhetoric: 'So, over the coming week and months, I will argue that our cultural sector can bring opportunities, regeneration, jobs and growth' (Miller, 2013).

Maria Miller's version of economic instrumentalism could best be described as rather simplistic, but the basic idea of expressing value in terms of economic benefits has been circulating for some quite time. Indeed, the cultural sector's hope that economic impact might support what government today refers to as the 'business case' for public spending (O'Brien, 2010: 5) dates back to the 1980s, and culminated



in John Myerscough's report *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (1988). Its introduction openly acknowledges the context of decreasing central government funding as a key driver of the work, alongside its advocacy intentions, when it states:

Arguments based on [the arts'] intrinsic merits and educational value were losing their potency and freshness, and the economic dimension seemed to provide fresh justification for public spending on the arts. (Myerscough, 1988: 2)

Yet, as Maria Miller's speech demonstrates, 25 years of economic value discourse have done very little to justify public spending on the arts: 'making the case' is still as problematic now as it was then, and the vast amounts of impact statistics produced since that time to prop up economic instrumentalism have not taken the sector to a place of financial stability. Still, the dominance of the economic frame for the discussion of value in a policy context has remained unchallenged.

### The economic impact gamble

In Britain (although the country is hardly exceptional in this regard), the academic arts and humanities have also attempted to advocate their value through reference to economic impact, and struggled to quantify such impact in monetary terms. As with the arts, instances of this defensive strategy have been especially noticeable in the post-2008 period and, as with the publicly funded arts, have a clear advocacy dimension. An illustrative example here is the prominent 2009 report from the main UK arts and humanities research funder, the AHRC, *Leading the World: The economic impact of UK arts and humanities research*. The report is structured in three chapters for which the central questions the document addresses provide the titles: 'Why is arts and humanities research important?'; 'Why should the taxpayer pay for it?'; and 'Why fund arts and humanities research through the AHRC?'. There is little doubt, then, that the report's *raison d'être* is to 'make the case' firstly for arts and humanities research funding, and then, for the AHRC as the best system for optimally distributing those resources. Arts policy researchers can immediately recognize the nature of the report's rhetorical ammunition, which suggests that

for every £1 spent on research by the AHRC, the nation may derive as much as £10 of immediate benefit and another £15–£20 of long-term benefit. Thus in 2006–7, the AHRC invested £60.3 million in new research, which implies immediate returns of over £616.9 million and a possible additional return over 25 years of around £1 billion. (AHRC, 2009: 3).

It is noteworthy that the *Leading the World* report was commissioned after the President of Universities UK (the sector organisation for HE) had questioned the extent to which the arts and humanities was making a convincing case for



continued public funding (Corbyn, 2009). The instinctual response seems to be always the same: when your claim on the public purse is threatened, reach for economic impact data, no matter whether solid or not.<sup>6</sup>

On this point about the inherent merit and solidity of the economic impact advocacy argument, it is interesting to quote the leading British economist John Kay, founding director of the Institute for Fiscal studies, one time chair of the London Business School, first director of Oxford University's Saïd Business School and therefore very well placed to spot cases of 'bad economics'. In a column for the comment section of the *Financial Times* published in August 2010, Kay reflects on the misguided nature of the economic impact rhetoric in relation to the arts and sport:

Many people underestimate the contribution disease makes to the economy. In Britain, more than a million people are employed to diagnose and treat disease and care for the ill. Thousands of people build hospitals and surgeries, and many small and medium-size enterprises manufacture hospital supplies. Illness contributes about 10 per cent of the UK's economy: the government does not do enough to promote disease.

The analogy illustrates the obvious fallacy. What the exercises measure is not the benefits of the activities they applaud, but their cost; and the value of an activity is not what it costs, but the amount by which its benefit exceeds its costs. [...] The economic value of the arts is in the commercial and cultural value of the performance, not the costs of cleaning the theatre. The economic perspective does not differ from the commonsense perspective. Good economics here, as so often, is a matter of giving precision to our common sense. Bad economics here, as so often, involves inventing bogus numbers to answer badly formulated questions. (Kay, 2010)

In light of the discussion so far, I would argue that the real problem on hand is that couching political discussions and negotiations around policy change crudely in terms of exquisitely economic benefits (thus obscuring benefits of a different nature such as those Kay refers to), and eagerly complying with dominant frames and government's desires in order to make one's argument more persuasive, are all pragmatic strategies that might or might not bear short-term fruit. In the long term, however, they are limiting, effect profound changes in the very nature of public discourse, and simply do not definitively resolve the justification issue. We have seen that socio-economic impact has so far failed to successfully 'make the case' for arts funding and to provide a credible solution to the justification issue. I would argue the same outcome is likely for humanities research unless a sustained attempt is made to broaden the debate from impact to public value.

Indeed, it is hard not to be struck by similarities in tone and argument between Myerscough's previously mentioned influential report, which effectively transformed long-term public arts funding and policy discourses in Britain, and Steve Smith's (President of Universities UK, UUK)<sup>7</sup> reflections for John Holmwood's

collection of essays in *A Manifesto for the Public University* (2011). Smith was involved as UUK president in the high level political debates that surrounded the reform of the HE sector in 2010. This resulted in cuts to all funding to arts, humanities and social sciences teaching, and in the raising of maximum undergraduate fees to £9000 in English universities (a trebling of previous fees levels for institutions already charging maximum fees).

As McGettigan (2013) clearly argues, these reforms are complex and ideologically driven by a desire to contribute to the coalition government's priority of reducing public deficit through cutting expenditure across the board, especially in the short-term. Smith himself (2011: 129) provides an insight into the strategic and defensive nature of the HE sector's argument at this difficult political juncture. He acknowledges that the backdrop to the negotiations and discussions preceding those sector reforms was a firm governmental commitment to reducing public spending. In this context, he explains, 'UUK needed to be pragmatic and to try to maximize the amount of funding that came to universities' (2011: 129). The chosen strategy focused on the mantra that 'universities are the engine rooms of the modern global economy' (2011: 130) and can be read as further proof of 'economism' predominant in public policy:

This decision to minimize the reductions in funding to universities meant that we based our case on the economic role of universities. We faced such a strong call for significant reductions in direct public funding to universities that *we felt the language of economics was the only language that would secure the future prosperity of our universities* and higher education institutions [...] Our *core argument* was that HE played not only a major educational and social role, but also a massive economic role. HE was, we claimed, a great success story and it would be madness to damage it. (Smith, 2011: 129–130; emphasis added)

Even more interesting in this regard is Smith's acknowledgement of the degree to which this position was determined by expediency and a desire to tell the government what they wanted to hear to achieve traction during otherwise difficult negotiations:

We tailored a narrative that did not start with the universities and what might be good for them, but with the economy, and specifically with the best strategy to ensure future economic growth. It was critically important for universities to emphasise to government the importance of not making decisions that would fundamentally undermine our future capacity to be a globally competitive knowledge economy. (Smith, 2011: 131)

I am keen to emphasise that I am not here critical of the general point that a healthy and adequately resourced HE sector is an important precondition for a flourishing national economy. I am not contesting the degree to which the academic arts and humanities contribute to the creative industries' competitiveness

and to lively and stimulating cultural institutions. These being uncontroversial points, they are also good reasons for governments to financially support both arts and humanities. This point is, however, only one aspect of the much more complex, multifaceted *role* and *value* of the HE sector, and hence only one of several sets of considerations that should drive policy in this area.

A cause for concern here is the way in which the systematic, anxiety-driven and essentially defensive recourse to narrowly utilitarian rationales for the support of the arts, culture, HE and scholarship (until only recently perceived to be public goods), has fundamentally reframed public policy debates. In discussing the impact agenda in relation to the social sciences, Brewer (2013: 136) notes that impact 'is often narrowly reduced to use-value and within that to economic usefulness', lamenting 'the confusion over what value means and the narrow way in which it is often employed, invoking [...] the currency of marketization by concentrating on price and use value'. The well-meaning but often uncritical endorsement of the economist frame in policy advocacy has restricted the arguments, values, and perspectives aired in these important public debates. The result is a collapse of value into impact of the sort that lends itself to be expressed in monetary terms, and the sort that assumes the equivalence of the contribution to a healthy society with the contribution to the economic growth agenda.

Particularly problematic here is the 'rhetoric of no alternative' deployed to justify very narrow understandings of economic impact and value at the expense of a more pluralistic discussion of what might make HE, and its constituent disciplines, valuable (or indeed, not valuable) to the nation, and why. This broader discussion should encompass these activities' economic dimension but critically, not be limited to it. The similarities in policy rhetoric in the arts and HE policy expose the degree to which political debates happen within a set parameter of acceptable argumentation that stifles diversity and effectively aligns policy development with the prevalent neoliberal agenda. Steve Smith's justification of Universities UK's tactics in negotiating with the Coalition leading up to the 2010 reforms rests on the observation that it worked: it eschewed tragedy by guaranteeing the sector the funding levels required to survive and possibly even thrive. Smith (2011) proudly argues that, despite the substitution of public funding to non-lab based teaching with higher fees paid by students, there will actually be *more* money coming into the English HE sector. He further argues that, far from being damaged by the changes, the arts and humanities and the social sciences are likely to be better off in the new system than in the older one. This might be the case, but the example of the arts shows that this advantage might well be short-lived.

## Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to show that the popularity of 'impact' is rooted in the anxiety of justification shared, in the current austere times, by the HE and cultural sectors. The markedly utilitarian emphasis on socio-economic usefulness marks what George Yúdice (1999: 19), talking about US arts policy in the 1990s,

refers to as ‘a change in legitimisation narratives’. As was the case for Myerscough in the late 1980s, the adoption of the economic impact rhetoric in contemporary funding discussions with government has a clear pragmatic slant. This adoption is clearly rooted in the hope of providing fresh and compelling rationales for funding at a time when old arguments borrowed from welfare economics and centred on notions of ‘public goods’ are losing their lustre. Looking at the publicly funded arts sector, it seems legitimate to conclude that the instrumental case in Britain worked as long as the economy flourished, seeing an additional £100 million to the arts in the 2001 Spending Review.

Yet, more recent funding developments, and the return to 1980s-style challenges and policy responses, call into question the long-term effectiveness of claims of impact as a rationale for arts funding. Adopting ‘impact’ as a short-cut for ‘value’ might be a way to sidestep a difficult wider public debate on where the value of the humanities might lie. But this is at best a short-term solution, which may result, over time, in an impoverished and shallow public debate on crucial questions of policy-making and funding.

Leaving aside questions of its effectiveness in addressing the legitimacy question, the instrumental rationality underlying economic value arguments for public investment in arts, culture and humanities scholarship is ultimately problematic because it is complicit with what FS Michaels refers to as the neoliberal *monoculture*:

In these early decades of the twenty-first century, *the master story is economic*; economic beliefs, values and assumptions are shaping how we feel, think, and act. The beliefs, values and assumptions that make up the economic story aren’t inherently right or wrong; they’re just a single perspective on the nature of reality. In a monoculture though, that single perspective becomes so engrained as the only reasonable reality that we begin to forget our other stories, and fail to see the monoculture in its totality, never mind question it. (Michaels, 2011: 9, emphasis added)

‘Impact’ as a proxy for ‘value’ and the cultish obsession with ‘the economy’ fit nicely with this monoculture and the particular type of instrumental rationality on which it thrives. Given this wider context, what should academics do about impact? The question is hardly a rhetorical one: ‘impact’ – planning, delivering, monitoring and demonstrating impact – is becoming a structural aspect of academic life. I am very much in agreement with John Brewer whose lucid treatment of similar concerns from a sociologist’s perspective argues that a disservice is being done to the social sciences ‘when social scientists react to the crisis facing them by refusing to engage with the impact agenda’ (Brewer, 2013: 7). He favours a critical form of engagement with ‘impact’ that can facilitate the renewal of the field and contribute to a reformulation of the public social sciences to be fit for the twenty-first century. The argument for constructive engagement and shaping of this agenda certainly also applies to the arts and humanities alongside and in collaboration with the social sciences. Surely, rejecting impact is not a solution to the value problem, just

as uncritically or defensively embracing the impact rhetoric is also not a solution. Rather, moving beyond the impact debate's limiting aspects and economic framing is the necessary first step for a more open, honest and indeed humble debate around value. This debate should also dare to consider not just how arts and humanities research might create public value, but also how and why it might fail to do so. This proposition may feel scary for a sector of academia now feeling especially vulnerable, but I would argue that dodging the awkward issues has not, to date, led the arts and humanities to a place of safety, strength and confidence. Perhaps now is the perfect time to just bite the bullet and reflect on how, alongside the social sciences, the arts and humanities should endeavour to 'to engage with public issues affecting the future of humankind', and on what might prevent them from doing so (Brewer, 2013: 10).

Some have already shown commitment to this cause; Alis Oancea shows how publically minded academics have already found ways to adapt to the new impact agenda by attempting to work it into already established wider social accountability practices and pre-existing commitments to public engagement and outreach:

In order to do this, they are reinterpreting the official agenda and articulating alternatives. These reinterpretations – and their visibility and weight in the public domain – are essential if impact is not to become yet another measure rendered meaningless by reducing it to a target for performance. (Oancea, 2013: 7)

This reinterpretation and parallel efforts to inject the possibility of an alternative into the technocratic measures of the 'monoculture' might open up a space for a more active societal engagement and hijack the impact agenda for genuinely emancipatory ends. Developing genuinely public humanities must tackle head on awkward questions of cultural authority and power at the heart of both contemporary arts and educational policies, and embrace the inherent ideological nature of the value question. The debate around value, its definition and its measurement will never be one on which consensus can easily be reached, but one which will require on-going negotiations of values, pressures, interests and power. Acknowledging this is important: the focus of our collective effort should be a better quality debate, rather than political consensus, the search for which might lead to complacency and complicity with hegemonic interests and perspectives, as is the case in the official 'impact agenda' and in the equivalence between cultural value and economic value that is too often postulated in policy circles.

Oancea (2013: 7) writes that 'for impact indicators to be an adequate proxy of research value, they need not only to be technically refined measures, but also to be pitched at the right level, so that they can function as catalysts of, rather than destabilize, higher education activity'. To do this, we would be well advised to renounce the temptation to make unrealistic claims of impact in the hope of having persuasive rhetorical power in the 'monoculture'. A sustained, collective effort in 'thinking otherwise' about impact and value might prove a fruitful experiment and a first step towards challenging the economic doxa.

## Funding

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## Notes

1. It is difficult to establish with any degree of precision just how microscopic the percentage of actual spend on the arts and culture is, but Arts Council England (ACE), in a written response to a recent economic impact they had commissioned, refer to a government investment of less than 0.1% of total spend (ACE, 2013).
2. As Brewer (2013: 119) pithily puts it: 'It is particularly tricky to accurately connect the research, its effects and the evidence of these effects'.
3. Again, Brewer (2013: 128) succinctly elucidates the problem here: 'Policy makers may be looking for research that legitimates current practice, whilst researchers are seeking to challenge current ways of thinking. The potential impact of the research in this case is being suppressed'.
4. Although of course, funding is a central question: cf. McGettigan (2013).
5. Starting from JH Plumb's *Crisis in the Humanities* published in 1964, there has been a lively strand of writing on the ongoing crisis and even possible impending demise of the arts and humanities as areas of scholarship, which I chart and discuss in Belfiore (2013).
6. The problem is, of course, that if claims of impact – economic, social, cultural or otherwise – become central to the case for funding, then the quality of the evidence of impact becomes of paramount importance, or the case would automatically crumble at the first proper scrutiny (Belfiore, 2002).
7. Universities UK is the representative and lobbying organisation for British universities, with a membership of 133 institutions.

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**Author biography**

**Eleonora Belfiore** is Associate Professor in Cultural Policy at the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at Warwick University, UK. She has published extensively on the notion of the 'social impacts' of the arts and the effect that the rhetoric of impact has had on British cultural policy. Her work amounts to a sustained intellectual critique of the role of evidence and research in decision-making in the cultural sector, in favour of an intellectual approach to cultural policy scholarship, which emphasises the political and value-driven dimension of cultural policy-making. She is author, with Oliver Bennett, of *The Social Impact of the Arts: An intellectual history* (Palgrave, 2008), and with Anna Upchurch she co-edited *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Utility and Markets* (Palgrave, 2013). More recently, her research has focused on cultural value and the problem of its articulation and measurement in cultural policymaking.