
Who is Funding Your Studies? The Fisher-Bulmer Debate on Philanthropic Support

Who is Funding Your Studies? The Fisher- Bulmer Debate on Philanthropic Support for the Social Sciences and its Importance to Contemporary Society.

On the 11th of November the Faculty of Humanities at Charles University invited Professor Martin Bulmer from the University of Surrey, United Kingdom, to discuss philanthropic support for social sciences, in a workshop entitled 'Interests and Motivations Explaining Philanthropic Support for Social Sciences: the Fisher-Bulmer Debate.' Bulmer's lecture focused on the Bulmer-Fisher debate, a debate between Professor Martin Bulmer and Professor Donald Fisher in the 1980s over the role of support of philanthropic for social sciences in the inter-war period, which Bulmer linked and asserted the importance to contemporary social science.



The argument between Bulmer and Fisher is about the role funding institutions, like the Rockefeller Foundation, play in academic research. Bulmer categorised Fisher's argument as the belief that philanthropic institutions reproduce cultural

hegemony of the dominant culture in science and social science research. Bulmer on the other hand believes that whilst the origins of the money are from capitalist enterprise that have often caused much destruction and many problems in society that Fisher's argument is crude, simplistic and ignores key evidence. Bulmer argued that in the case of Rockefeller funding the donations which were controlled by a board of trustees that the Rockefeller family had appointed and that the actual Rockefeller family had little input into the donations; Bulmer pointed out this was typical of most philanthropic institutions. Bulmer therefore argued that how could this be the maintaining and reproduction of the status quo through cultural hegemony. This point made me question if the board of trustees (who were predominately white business men) interests could not itself lean towards the funding of research that would further their interests, which would be the same of the dominant hegemonic culture.

Bulmer also criticised Fisher's argument in addressing a key issue that affects all work about cultural hegemony; how can you measure cultural hegemony? Much research funded by Rockefeller and other philanthropic institutions can also be seen as resistance to the cultural hegemony. Therefore Fisher's argument can also be seen to be patronising and does not acknowledge people's agency to subvert even 'hegemonic' funded enterprises.

Bulmer also discussed the increasing professionalism and empiricism of social sciences which Bulmer cited as beginning at the end of nineteenth century, start for the twentieth century corresponding to the rise of philanthropic support for social science. Bulmer argues that the link between increasing professionalism and empiricism was accelerated by most philanthropic support but not caused by it. Unlike Fisher's argument that believes the increasing drive of empiricism and professionalism was an example of philanthropic support causing cultural hegemony.

Another presentation at the workshop by Doctor Jan Balon entitled 'The Great Transformation of Social Science in the Face of the Great Depression: The Social Science Research Council and the Public Relevance of Sociology in the Time of Crisis?' looked at the promotion of empiricism and professionalism by philanthropic institutions. Balon noted the issues with this promotion, it often meant work funded by Rockefeller had to ignore previous research which was not empirical and the fragmentation of sociology which meant they could not help with practical issues. Bulmer mentioned some of the benefits of professionalism as it creates a space, time and funding for social sciences. However, who gets these benefits needs to be interrogated. The professionalism of social sciences and often favouritism and promotion of empiricism in contemporary academia means these are importance issues for contemporary social science that Bulmer and Balon are addressing.

The final presentation of the workshop, which unfortunately due to time reasons had to be cut short, by Doctor Marek Skovajsa put Fisher's cultural hegemony argument and the workshop into a more international context. Skovajsa's presentation was entitled 'Can the 'Cultural Hegemony' Thesis Be Applied to the Rockefeller Foundation's Support for Czechoslovak Social Sciences?' using a debate based on the United States putting it in a global context. Skovajsa stated that Rockefeller could be argued to support capitalism in Czechoslovakia but the relationship was not that simple. This shows that the theory could be useful in an international context it is westcentric and would need to be developed to be useful in a context of different power relations, such as the Soviet Union.

The Bulmer-Fisher argument addressed key issues about contemporary academia which was useful and important for a privately funded post-graduate to state funded undergraduate like myself. It brought up important issues about funding and how that affects the studies available to us and why they are the ones available to us. It is also a reminder of the importance of the process of studying and how it is not above society but part of the construction of society. It also discussed key issues of professionalism, empiricism and westcentric in social sciences.