

ERA and the Social Sciences

According to Kim Carr Era has 'rigorously measured' Australia's research achievements'. This 'rigorous' measurement found that Australia underperformed in the Social Sciences which received an average score of 2.5, a score below world standards. The two largest contributing disciplines to this low score, Political Science and Sociology, received 2.3 and 2.4 respectively. Are we to conclude that most of what our political scientists and sociologists do is below world standard? Research in Historical Studies received 3.1, and in Cultural Studies at 2.9. Work by political scientists and sociologists was included in these codes, much political history went to Historical Studies, and a good deal of cultural sociology ended up in Cultural Studies. Why is there such a discrepancy between the results, when in many cases it is work by the very same people, world class in one FOR code, below par in another?

One possible explanation is that assessors of the humanities codes were more generous than those in the social science, which may well be the case. There are, however, other systemic contributing factors which have distorted the way research output was measured in the Social Sciences. Here I want to canvas three: deep ideological divisions in the Social Sciences between interpretative and quantitative traditions; a bias against Area Studies in the journal rankings; and the invisibility of publicly engaged research output, what I will call the Robert Manne problem. Each of these distortions not only makes the outcomes in the Social Sciences less than rigorous measurements, but each also carries real risks of perverse outcomes.

Politics and Sociology researchers in Australia work in a range of scholarly traditions from the more humanities oriented interpretative traditions from which the disciplines sprang to the positivist and quantitative traditions which dominate the social sciences in North America. Those working in the latter are often unsympathetic to work drawing on more interpretative scholarly traditions. This divide is fiercest in sociology, with some quantitatively oriented sociologists dismissive of non-quantitative work. Given the opacity of the ERA process, it is impossible to know what role this played, but the comparison with cultural studies much higher score suggests it played some. The work of George Simmel, a seminal figure in urban sociology, would likely have got a 2 from Sociology and a 4 from Cultural Studies, missing out on a 5 because he failed to mention gender and race.

ERA seriously disadvantages academics who research the politics of other countries and publish their research in multidisciplinary Area Studies journals. Journal rankings are most reliable for the core disciplinary journals, such as those associated with disciplinary associations. Multidisciplinary journals do

not fare so well. No discipline owns them, so no disciplinary association goes into bat for them and many world class journals languish in the Bs. *Modern China* for example. Area Studies was once strong in politics programs, integral to a broad undergraduate education in contemporary politics. It has been on the decline for some time, squeezed out by the growth of International Relations on the one side and Public Policy on the other, as well as by the general decline in foreign language skills and teaching. ERA will accelerate this decline as young academics look to their careers and departments to their research reputation. Teaching will follow research. If there is no one in Australia researching Russian politics or the politics of Latin America or Easter Europe, you can bet there will be no undergraduate, or even postgraduate courses on them. Is this what the government wants?

Robert Manne is perhaps the best known academic working in an Australian politics department, best known that is to the Australian public for whom he is a leading public intellectual. Yet most of his considerable output is invisible to ERA measurements because he chooses not to publish articles in referred journals but instead to write for a general public to inform and influence public debate in Australia. His writing is informed by deep knowledge of contemporary political history, by research and by a broad understanding of the moral dilemmas of politics in the real world. Politicians may well be pleased that the academy will no longer produce academics like Robert Manne who challenge their political decisions with well-informed and reasoned moral arguments. John Howard would certainly have had an easier ride had Manne been spending his time writing for A and A* journals. But is this what the Australian public wants, the Australian academics best able to write about contemporary politics disengaged from the polity in which they live?

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