

“We are probably unique in Britain”: scalar discourses of science and society

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Objective

- How is scale employed in UK discourses of science and society?
 - UK government documents
 - Interviews with UK scientists, especially a senior scientist/clinician in north east England

Scale

- A relatively unsophisticated conception: 'the level of geographical resolution at which a given phenomena is thought of or acted upon' (Agnew 1997 p.100 in Brenner 2004 p.9)
- Scale is always multiple and emergent (not pre-given) (Brenner)
- Contemporary importance of city-region and national scales (Brenner p.3)

UK government

Global vision of competition; national imperative of innovation

“The Review examines the role of science and innovation in ensuring the UK remains competitive in our increasingly globalised economy.” (*The Race to the Top*, Lord Sainsbury 2007)

“To raise productivity, foster competitive businesses, meet the challenges of globalisation and to live within our environmental and demographic limits, the UK must excel at all types of innovation.” (*Innovation Nation*, DIUS 2008)

National imperative of innovation

- As Matthew has discussed
- Geographically and institutionally distributed implementation

National imperative of innovation; national imperative for society

“The Government believes that if the UK is to take full advantage of the opportunities for creating wealth and improving quality of life offered by scientific discovery and technological development, it is crucial that we develop new approaches to bring scientists and the public together in a constructive dialogue to explore emerging issues” (OST 2006 p.1).

“A new vision: a *society* that is excited by science, values its importance to our social and economic wellbeing, [and] feels confident in its use...”

“We believe there is a need for *all citizens* to be fully engaged with science and to understand the nature of science better. *Everyone* should have the opportunity to play a relevant part in making the best possible decisions for public policy through engagement with science” (DIUS 2008 pp. 15 & 21).

National strategies for society

- Sciencewise (public dialogue) (DIUS)
- Public attitudes surveys (RCUK/DIUS)
- The BA (science communication) (DIUS)
- The Beacons for Public Engagement (RCUK/HEFCE)
- Science RCs Science and Society programmes
- 'Slave' (Donovan) ESRC programmes and networks (DIUS)

Implementing national strategies for society

- Homogenised society; geographically distributed implementation
 - Info in: representativeness and legitimacy
 - Info out: coverage
- Institutionally distributed implementation
 - Government intermediary bodies
 - Commercial and not-for-profit organisations of various stripes
 - Higher education institutions

Interviews with scientists

SCOPE

- Scientists on public engagement
- Funded by **welcome**trust
- Sarah Franklin and Kerry Holden
- Interviews with 30 life scientists, May 2007-June 2008
- National conceptions of science and society

Except for John Burn

- 13 February 2008
- Medical Director and Head of Institute of Human Genetics, University of Newcastle *and* Executive Director of the Northern Genetics Knowledge Park
- Highly conspicuous interview for its uniquely strong emphasis on a distinctive city-regional identity
- History, science, relationships and public
- The national becomes a facilitator (or not) and a reference point

Science as regional regeneration

“Well, I think that there is another dimension to it in the North of England, and that is that we have just come out of 100-year recession. We did the soup-kitchens and the Jarrow hunger-marches when all of our industry collapsed at the beginning of the 20th Century. We kind of recovered into a rather grey zone of inadequate resources until Margaret Thatcher came along and wiped out all of our industries at a stroke.”

Science as regional initiative

“So [the government] started putting in these these development corporations into the riversides to try to regenerate, and the Tyne Wear Development Corporation owned this site, ...and I teamed up with the guy who used to run the development corporation and cut a long story short we basically put a combined bid to the Millennium Commission to build this development .”

National facilitation?

“But we succeeded, despite the best efforts of the civil servants to do it down, because in the typical British manner ... [they] said, ‘well let’s actually give you half the money and you find the rest. That way we can be confident that you’re trying hard.’ What it effectively did to most of the Millennium Projects, was that it destroyed them because they couldn’t raise their money fast enough.”

Challenging notions of a homogeneous national public

“I think what’s happening now is that the North East and particularly the Newcastle population have become very proud of their science, so now we do things that are better than London, Oxford and Cambridge. Whereas the people of the North-East are rather more utilitarian in their approach to these issues and just say, does it work, we’ll do it, it looks okay to me, and they trust the doctors and the researchers in the university, many of whom are from the North-East, to get on with it.”

Challenging notions of homogeneous science-society relations

“We are probably unique in Britain, and perhaps worldwide, in the degree to which what we do is done in public. Our centre is a very large bright-blue building, next to the central station, in the middle of the city, and is a 15 minute walk away from the hospital and the university, so we are out in public gaze. More than that, we actually built children’s laboratories into this building. ... On top of that we have our very own Visitor’s Centre, which is part of our Millennium landmark project ... the Catholic Bishop actually speaks on our behalf, because we engage with him, and ... I am giving a talk on genetics to the synagogue shortly, so we’re actually embedded in our city and the city, interestingly, had increasingly take pride in us.”

Is it the NE that's different, or is it the SE

"I think what I am describing is the real world. I think what I am describing would be good in Crewe, and York and Leicester and most places. I think that the public debate tends to be very skewed towards the Today Programme [BBC Radio 4 flagship] and Oxbridge and so on. I think it is true that the people of Oxford, Cambridge and London think they represent Britain. Actually, they represent the people of Oxford, Cambridge and London. I'm perfectly happy to operate in that environment, but I see it as an extremely artificial one and not as representative of modern Britain."

Concluding thoughts

- Both analyses suggest that - with respect to science and society issues - Brenner is correct to emphasise the importance of the city-regional and national scales
- City-regional identity can be an important factor in conceptions of publics, and science-society relations
- Conceptions of nationally homogeneous publics, and science and society relations, can be challenged
- Regional variations in this regard might be a fruitful line of enquiry

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