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IMPACT RE-LOADED

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There are various attempts to circumscribe and catch the meaning of "impact" related to and resulting from scholarly research from the social sciences and humanities.1 For all their commendable efforts, these definitions cannot remove the impression that the initial need to come up with a definition is driven by political motives. As a result, the use of the term "impact" has often acquired a defensive tone. The political motives spring largely from increasing demands for accountability; and the defensiveness can be detected in the way "impact" is set up to prove the relevance to society.

We argue that time has come to move beyond a purely defensive stance on the part of the social sciences and humanities. There is a more substantial issue involved, namely, to re-think the transformative relationship between science and society. Scientific research is about transformation – how to enable it, or how to avoid it. It is about the transformation that society is undergoing as much as about the transformative power inherent in knowledge and policies based on social science knowledge. The social sciences and humanities are deeply involved in the processes that use scientific and scholarly approaches to bring about a better society, difficult as it may be to define it. Arguably, their societal and political relevance has always been more present in the political arena than that of the natural sciences. This should be acknowledged and not denied.

Social sciences and humanities have to look at "impact" in a different way – the term needs to be "re-loaded" with a renewed sense of responsibility and reflecting a different self-image of their role and position in society. Instead of using "impact" solely as a defensive instrument to preserve the status quo of the social sciences and humanities, the contemporary focus on "impact" offers a unique window of opportunity for the social sciences and humanities to reflect upon and redefine their role and redefine their societal relevance. This understanding of "impact" is not limited to the instrumental "use value" that SSH research may provide for certain user groups, but is wide-ranging through the implicit embeddedness of SSH within society, provided that it remains open to society, and its power to analyse and explain social phenomena and to contribute to overcoming societal drawbacks through a diversity of discourse and exchange levels and formats. These aspects can be dealt with distinctively, albeit they are interrelated.

a. With "impact" becoming the driving force for assessing relevance of scientific endeavors the social sciences and humanities are in a position to contribute to, and shape the concept. The reason is that they study impact, they reflect impact, and they assess impact. It is not by chance that a social scientist has elevated the notion of "unintended consequences" to prominence and that assessing these consequences has become one of the main rationales of applied research in the social sciences and humanities.
b. The social sciences and humanities have made tremendous progress in the past two decades, in terms of expanding their methodology and conceptual approaches. While there is still much disagreement among disciplines, schools of thought, and epistemic communities, much of this is due to the logic of how academia is organised. Here, "impact" may offer a powerful leverage to address inconsistencies and to come up with a more collaborative understanding of what is at stake, thereby ironing out many of the rather frustrating internal academic struggles.
c. Finally, the rise and productivity of the social sciences and humanities have been strongly connected and inevitably shaped by the process of modernity. While this interdependence has been acknowledged, the repercussions have not fully been absorbed. Transformative science must be transformative in a double sense: wanting to exert influence in society but also open to be influenced by society and its needs. In other words, only if open two-way mutual communication channels are established, societal needs, regardless of their origins and the ways in which they are expressed, the transformative power inherent in SSH research can unfold in society. Among other, this necessitates greater openness and readiness as well as capability to involve heterogeneous groups in society, rather than remaining fixated on policy-makers.

The conference offers a unique setting to take on these various aspects, and to rethink the vital role the social sciences and humanities can play in facing many of the challenges European societies are confronted with. Policy issues range: from environmental issues and behaviour, agricultural policy and consumption, technology and innovation, security, foreign and defence, public finances, culture and media, health, judiciary, to transport and economic sustainability. To stimulate a process of re-loading, we invite for papers from different perspectives of impact. In particular, we would like to move "impact" from a mostly defensive, albeit policy-relevant instrument to something that will become a transformative element towards a more inclusive society.

1 For the sake of orientation, Reale, E. et al. provide a definition of scientific, social and political impact, stating that "SSH research generates scientific impact when it influences the production of further research outputs following new approaches for analysis or based on new results. Changes related to social impact affect the cultural, economic, and social life of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Political impact incorporates the contents of research into political decisions, and motivations and rationales for political action and priority setting." Reale, E. et al. (2017): A review of literature on evaluating the scientific, social and political impact of social sciences and humanities research. Research Evaluation 2017, 1-11, doi: 10.1093/reseval/rvx025.

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