

# **Social Science Research and Public Policy: Some General Issues and the Case of Geography**

Professor Ron Martin  
University of Cambridge

Preliminary Draft of Presentation at  
The 'Impact, Exchange and Making a Difference' Conference  
School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

University of Birmingham  
8 June 2012

# **Role of Social Science in Public Policy**

- A key issue facing social science is its relationship to public policy -
- How relevant is (current) social science research to the discourse and practice of public policy?
- How far should the conduct of social science research be shaped by needs of policy-makers?
- Research-informed policy? Or policy-driven research?

# **Role of Social Science in Public Policy**

- Role and impact of social science depends on:
- Socio-economic problems of the day
- Theoretical paradigms and empirical themes currently fashionable
- Dominant political and ideological dispositions of policy-makers themselves
- As these factors change, so too does debate about policy relevance of social science
- Witness the crisis of free-market economics in wake of financial crash

# Role of Social Science in Public Policy

- Role is (or should be) essentially threefold:
  - ◆ To expose and explain the processes involved in the socio-economic-environmental problems that capitalism produces, both routinely and periodically
  - ◆ To interrogate and evaluate existing public policy discourses, practices and interventions
  - ◆ To help inform and improve the formulation of public policy measures

# Evidence-Based Policy and Social Science Research

- Last decade has seen upsurge in ‘evidence based policy’ and focus on ‘what works’
- Evidence needed to help determine the design of policies, to inform their delivery and to assess their effectiveness
- This raises some key issues;
  - ◆ What sort of ‘evidence’ is relevant?
  - How should evidence shape and inform policy?
  - What sort of research is relevant to evidence-based policy?

# **Evidence-Based Policy and Social Science Research**

- An ‘evidence-based’ approach should include the results of research and analysis at all stages of policy process:
  - Basic conceptual and critical work on economy and society
  - And on ideological/theoretical frameworks of alternative policy agendas
  - Theoretical-critical analysis of policy making process and discourse
  - Analysis of policy options and actions
  - Analysis of policy delivery and implementation
  - And monitoring and explaining outcomes

# Evidence-Based Policy and Social Science Research

- But image of social science in general amongst policy-makers has generally not been a positive one -
- Recurring complaint that much social science research is not relevant to practical policy issues: much of it is on 'marginal' issues or too theoretical
- That social scientists write mainly to influence one another (what is the role of the REF here?)
- Too much social science lacks empirical rigour
- Whereas rise of 'evidence-based policy' requires high quality empirical research

# Political Criticism of Policy Irrelevance of much Social Science Research

- Politicians have not been overly persuaded about usefulness of social science research for policy:

“Social science researchers address issues other than those which are central and directly relevant to the political and policy debate... [and] fail to take into account the reality of many people’s lives ... some of the most gifted and creative researchers seem to have turned away from policy-related issues, preferring to work on questions of little interest outside the research community” (David Blunkett, UK Secretary of State for Education, 2000).



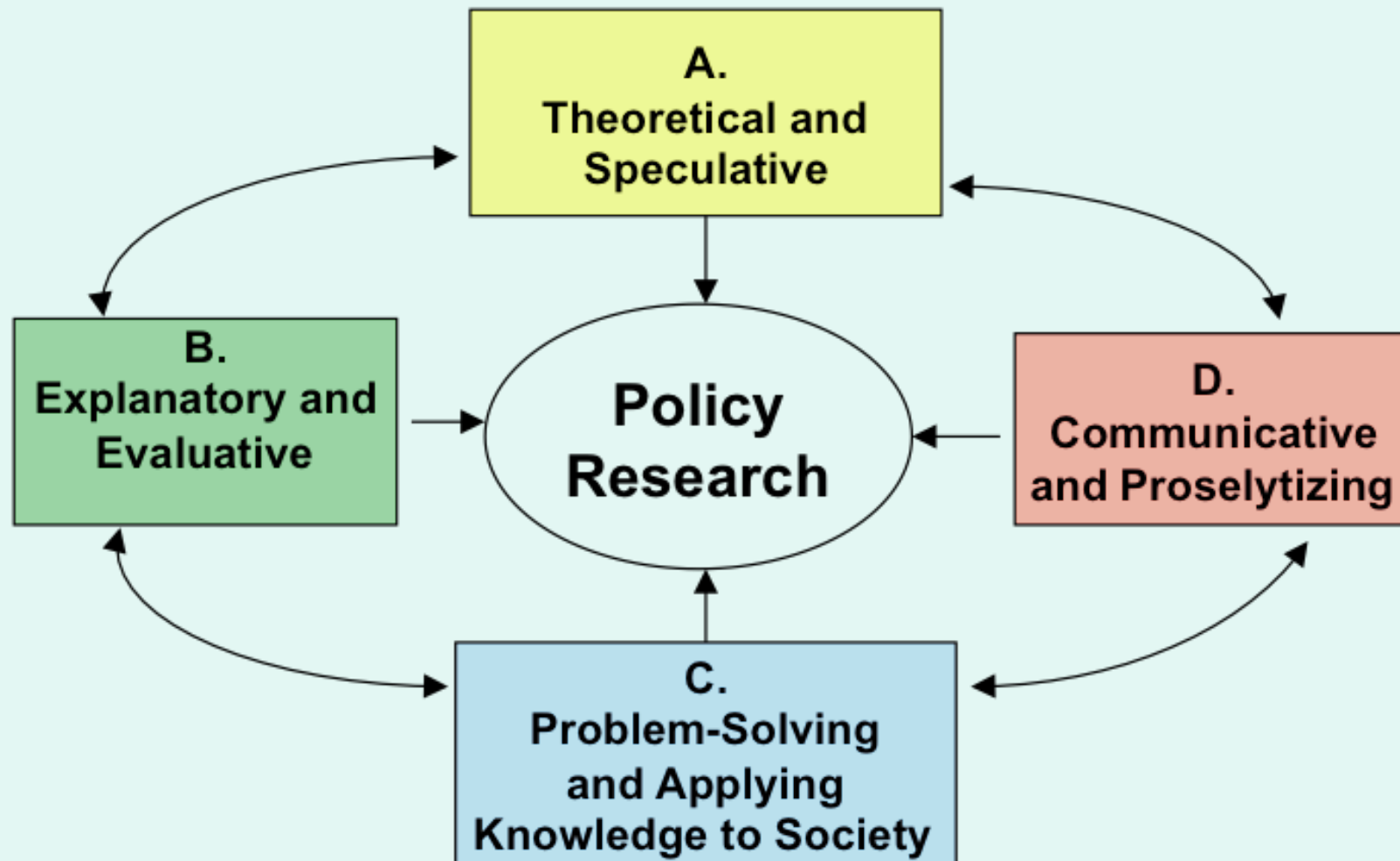
# **Political Criticism of Policy Irrelevance of much Social Science Research**

- More recently, social sciences have come under increasing political pressure
- When all public funding is under scrutiny, social sciences are having to fight their corner against the physical, technological and medical sciences
- Increasing pressure for social science research to be able to demonstrate clear benefits to society
- Various campaigns to promote importance of social science research – Academy of Social Sciences, British Academy, ERSC, etc

# **Political Criticism of Policy Irrelevance of much Social Science Research**

- Possible to argue the case for benefits of social science research for policy (eg. on crime, poverty, well-being, ageing, entrepreneurship, etc).
- But considerable scope exists for more impact
- “Social science research has to be at the heart of public policy” (ESRC, 2011)
- But that research has to be sound, scientifically based and persuasive
- And communicated effectively!

# Types of Research Activity and Policy



# **Types of Social Science Research Activity and Public Policy**

- **A. Theoretical and Speculative**
- Basic research into societal ‘big issues’ (eg ‘globalisation’, ‘financialisation’, ‘governance’, ‘well-being’, food security’, ‘risk’, ‘resilience’, etc)
- New theoretical work on specific issues – eg. innovation, entrepreneurship, incidence of poverty, etc
- Speculative research on new approaches – eg evolutionary economics, neuro-economics
- May not map immediately into policy, but may have impact over longer term

# **Types of Social Science Research Activity and Public Policy**

- **B. Explanatory and Evaluative**
- Empirically rigorous work that can provide 'evidence base' for policy makers
- Testing theoretical propositions
- Identifying the causes of 'stylised facts', trends and patterns of socio-economic conditions and outcomes
- Case-study research to elicit general and specific factors
- Evaluating impact of particular events and policy interventions

# Types of Social Science Research Activity and Public Policy

- **C. Problem Solving**
- Focuses specifically on pressing social problems (eg why are particular urban areas high crime areas? Why does ill-health vary geographically?)
- Can be problems that have been identified or selected for action by policy-makers
- ‘Contrastive comparison’ studies aimed at isolating key causes of, and hence potential solutions to particular problems
- Assessing impact of policies via comparing ‘policy on’ and ‘policy off’ groups or conditions – ‘quasi experiments’

# **Types of Social Science Research Activity and Public Policy**

- **D. Communication and Engagement Activities**
- Proselytising activities - Writing for policy community (and not just for other academics) - eg Michael Porter, Richard Florida
- Responding to Governmental calls for evidence and research on specific issues
- Working with and advising policy bodies (Government, EC, OECD, World Bank, etc)
- Role of Research Centres (critical research mass, greater voice and impact?)

## **Some Issues in Policy-Related Research**

- Research has to be theoretically and empirically sound
- Needs rigorous conceptual base
- But also capable of being expressed in uncomplicated terms
- Evidential support needs to be sufficiently extensive and methodologically sound
- Much social science work is empirically 'thin' and overly qualitative, often based on few interviews



# Some Issues in Policy-Related Research

- **The Problem of Ideological ‘Mismatch’**
- What if research findings run counter to the existing ideological-policy position? (ie not politically ‘on message’)
- Or competing theoretical interpretations exist on a problem and its solution?
- Witness current ‘austerity versus growth’ debate (essentially Keynes versus Hayek)
- Both good theory and strong evidence key here – resort to polemic unlikely to be convincing

# Geography and Public Policy

- Decade or so ago, debate broke out in geography as to policy relevance
- Critics (Markusen, Martin, Dorling) argued that geography was having little impact, because:
  - ◆ Conceptually fuzzy (terms and notions ill-defined)
  - ◆ Empirically thin (superficial data analysis)
  - ◆ Too policy-distant (not orientated enough to practical policy issues)
  - ◆ 'Cultural turn' partly responsible
  - ◆ When engaged with policy issues, tends to be too negative and critical in orientation

# Geography and Public Policy

- Countered by others who argued that:
- Much geographical research *is* of social relevance (Massey)
- That lack of impact is more a problem that rests with politicians and policy-makers, who are obsessed with economists and business school academics
- And that in fact ‘policy’ work in geography often goes unseen – eg local political involvement and activism (Massey, Ward, Wills )

# Geography and Public Policy

- Have things improved over past decade or so?
- To some extent – eg.
  - ◆ State of British Cities research for New Labour's ODPM
  - ◆ Assessment of local impact of New Deal
  - ◆ Inputs to EU policy on cohesion and competitiveness
  - ◆ OECD and World Bank on globalisation and retail services
  - ◆ Mapping clusters and creative industries in UK
  - ◆ Informing debate over regional policy
  - ◆ Research support to London 'living wage' campaign
- But considerable scope for greater impact

# Geography and Public Policy

- Geographers have lost out to economists, even on spatial policy matters
- New breed of spatial economists have made major inroads to policy areas that geographers ought to have held sway - eg:
- Porter and his cluster policy model
- NEG models of spatial economic development - highly influential at various policy levels (World Bank, OECD, EU and UK Government)
- Why?

# Geography and Public Policy

- **Porter's cluster model** – not formal, but rooted in business economics - the competitiveness of the firm
- Strongly orientated towards policy
- Reputation of Porter as business economist
- Porter as a successful proselytiser
- **NEG models** – highly formal, even unrealistic
- But capable of producing various results under different assumptions, and hence 'what-if' analyses
- This makes them suitable for assessing possible policy impacts

# Geography and Public Policy

- Currently at a critical juncture in public policy in UK:
  - ◆ Austerity versus growth debate
  - ◆ Shrinking the state
  - ◆ Restricting welfare
  - ◆ ‘Conscripting the ‘third sector’ – the ‘Big Society’ idea
  - ◆ ‘Rebalancing’ the economy
- All part of a growing ‘localism agenda’
- Should be a major opportunity for geographers to contribute and influence policy discourse and practice

# Geography and Public Policy

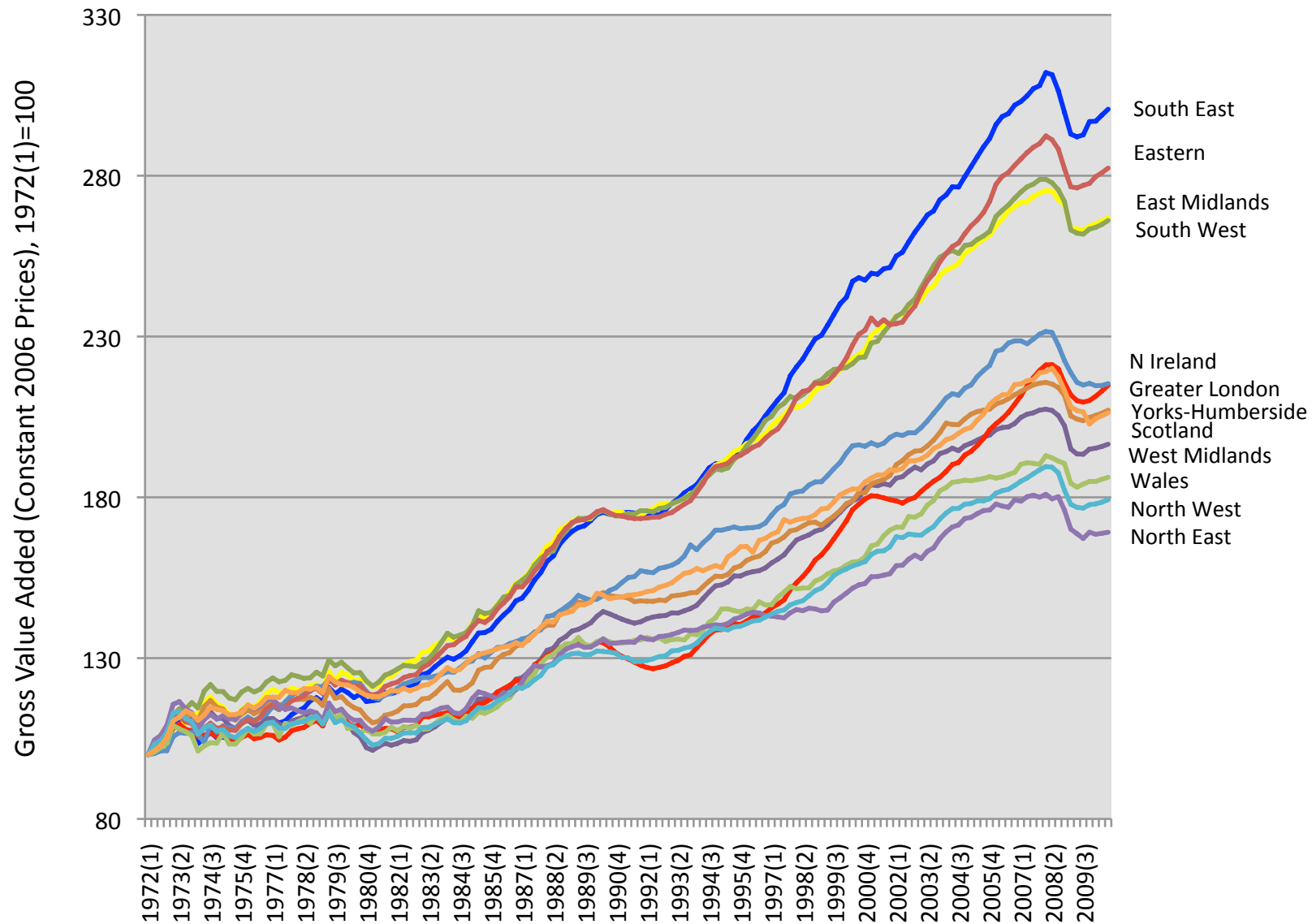
- Consider the Government's aim to 'spatially rebalance' the economy:

“For years, our prosperity has been pinned on financial wizardry in London's Square Mile, with other sectors and other regions left behind. That imbalance left us hugely exposed when the banking crisis hit. And now Britain has a budget deficit higher than at any time since the Second World War. It is time to correct that imbalance. ***We need to spread growth across the whole country and across all sectors***” (Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister, 2010).



# Spatially Imbalanced Growth in the UK, 1972-2010

## (Growth of GVA in the Standard Regions)



# Geography and Public Policy

- What is Government's policy to achieve that aim?
- What, precisely, is a 'spatially balanced' economy?
- What are causes of spatial imbalance? – answer to this should guide policy
- Government's approach is not coherent: assortment of initiatives (LEPS, Enterprise Zones, Technology and Innovation Centres, Young Entrepreneur Fund, etc)
- Wants to spread growth more evenly across the UK, but also influenced by NEG-orientated Spatial economic Research Centre (LSE)
- Which (ironically!) argues for people-based rather than place-based policy

# Geography and Public Policy

- Geographers have long discussed possible causes of spatial-economic imbalance in UK
- An entrenched problem that is not due just to 'market failures' nor to spatial agglomeration economies
- Due to institutionalised spatial structures of economic, political and financial power
- Geographers should initiate major debate on these and related dimensions of UK's spatial economic imbalance

# **Improving Impact on Public Policy: Some Conclusions**

- Improving the basic research foundations of social science:
  - High quality, conceptually rigorous, methodologically sound, and well-evidenced research
  - Where possible, policy implications of that research should figure prominently
- Giving greater emphasis to research on societal and policy-related problems
  - Research bodies can be influential here
  - Using, where possible, contrastive and control case studies in research to evaluate policy impacts
  - Working with and for policy bodies

# Improving Impact on Public Policy:

## Some Conclusions

- Promoting wider public and political awareness of social science research findings
  - Key role for academic associations here (Academy of Social Sciences, British Academy, Royal Geographical Society, etc)
  - Responding to official calls for evidence
  - Establishing policy outreach and engagement bodies within universities
  - Researchers need to become more promotional of their work and findings
- Recognising and rewarding contributions to policy research in Research Excellence Assessments (REF)