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DEMOCRACY AND EVALUATION*

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Introduction

For the past ten years I have been employed more or less full time as an 'independent' evaluator of educational programmes in Britain, mostly programmes of new curriculum development, mostly concerned with secondary schools in England and Wales, mostly sponsored by government or semi-government agencies.

During this period, a decade in which evaluation has evolved from a minor to a major branch of applied educational research, I have benefitted enormously from contacts with research communities outside Britain, and I want to say how warmly I welcome this opportunity to exchange views and experiences with Canadian educators.

Evaluation, like other fields of enquiry, is beset by a number of persistent dilemmas, some technical, some ethical, and some, I would suggest, political. Unless we can, and soon, solve the fundamental issues raised by the now widespread acknowledgement that evaluation is a significant from of political action, then I doubt very much whether the kind of activity in which I and many others throughout the Western hemisphere are presently engaged can survive as a defensible social role.

My theme for this presentation has the rather grandiose title of 'Democracy and Evaluation'. I should, and do, apologise for that, but only because it promises more than I can deliver. We have reached a point in the development of social policy evaluation

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where consciousness of evaluation as a political activity, one which influences the distribution of goods and opportunities in our societies, has never been higher. And I want to take this opportunity to confront, as directly as I may and as crudely as I must, the problem of the political stance of the evaluation specialist in the liberal democratic state. My emphasis, one which reflects my own work experience, is upon the evaluation of major programmes of educational innovation. This may not match too well the interests or opportunities that most of you have in evaluation, but I believe that the main issues are important to all of us, and have implications for the design of evaluations at any level.

First an anecdote which encapsulates some of my anxieties about contemporary evaluation trends. Last week I met a man who was just about to resign his job as a civil servant in the Brussels-based bureaucracy of the European Economic Community. In this job he had helped to launch a Community-wide programme for the socially disadvantaged, and now he was leaving to set up a private agency to evaluate the programme under contract to the EEC. He hoped to expand the agency through further EEC evaluation contracts in the future, and to locate it in a European university with which he was presently negotiating terms. In return for facilities and some as yet undetermined form of associate academic status he was prepared to offer the university forty per cent overheads on the contract. Nice man, quite open and enthusiastic about the enterprise. And why not? The path he has chosen is already becoming well-trodden, and he did not share my concerns about the political significance of this particular form of entrepreneurial opportunism. These concerns will I hope become clear in what follows.

A Portrayal of the Liberal Democratic Evaluator

Let me begin with a broad and inescapably crude sketch of how we evaluators might see our political role within the contemporary liberal democratic state. When our children grow old enough (or are still young enough) to ask us how we help to create a better society for them and their friends, don't we reply more or less like this. We work in the welfare sector of managed states, helping to bring about a more equitable distribution of social goods by improving the basis of public decisions on social action programmes. It makes little difference whether we live in basically capitalist or basically socialist democracies, in America or Britain. Both are pretty mixed anyway, and both have a growing commitment on the part of elected governments to reducing the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. We would concede that reducing this gap is no small problem, as its persistence testifies, but speaking as 'liberals' (and one of our colleagues, Ernest House (1976) has recently pointed out that we are all political liberals despite the various ways we define and prosecute evaluation) we believe that a key element in the alleviation of social ills is informed executive and legislative action. Sustained by this belief we open more and more public windows on the private world of educational practice, documenting the impact of the latest policies and programmes, drawing attention to malfunctions, unconsidered phenomena, occasional promise. Better information, we say, makes possible more effective discharge of public responsibilities.

Mind you we're not completely naive. Modern democracies confer, even if temporarily, enormous power on their authorised agents, and we recognise that power generates its own agenda. Most of us work, directly or indirectly, for powerful office-holders, and we know that the kind of information we produce can be used to sustain, extend or justify power in ways which have nothing to do with or are even inconsistent with the creation of a just society. We know

that, and we are conscious of the need to maintain safeguards against such possible abuses. We wouldn't work for private individuals, for instance, because the public accountability of those to whom we deliver our reports is a most important condition of the service we offer. Fortunately most of us evaluators are members of academias; we work as contractors, not employees, of those we inform, and the independence this gives us constitutes a form of latent countervailing power in the event of gross knavery or patent folly on the part of the people's representatives or their servants. This power is not, except in the strictest political sense, illegitimate. It is part of the essential social meaning of the University that it safeguards a source of disinterested critique, and this is partly why universities enjoy an unusual degree of autonomy and security. But let us not be doubly naive either. Academic independence is limited by dependence on state support - we academics have no capital, and must trade with our societies to survive. As for our power to intervene it is difficult to see how we can exercise this more than sparingly without generating in ourselves the very power syndrome we would seek to restrain in others. We too are agents.

But even this partial and qualified independence is sufficient to enable us to fulfill an acceptable and justifiable socio-political role. Because our academic colleagues- those who do the basic, the pure, the fundamental research, generally reserve to themselves the right to identify and define problems worthy of investigation, thus safeguarding the major process of knowledge production against bids for control by sectional interests, we educational evaluators can provide a more direct service of utilitarian nature, docile to information needs arrived at through political processes in which we participate only as other citizens do. We take care to publish our results of course, and to submit our methods and procedures to the scrutiny of our colleagues. And we challenge misrepresentations of our findings from any quarter.

Finally, in drawing this brief sketch to a close, we might summarise by saying that in these various ways we help our society to close the 'gap' between the 'haves' and 'have nots', to become more like the society it wants to be, a society of less poverty, less privilege, more opportunity for every individual to fulfill himself. We sleep well at nights, and surely deserve to. And so, children, to bed.

Critique of the Portrayal

But the gap between the haves and have nots continues to nag, like a bad tooth, especially as we ourselves prosper. Why does it persist, and what has its persistence to do with our efforts, our role, our assumptions? Could it be that the rhetoric of government intent, by which we set so much store, is mere rhetoric, the persuasive sloganising of a powerless or corrupt political system held captive by private corporate wealth? There are those who say so. Like American school of marxist historians of education, led by Karier, who "start with the assumption that this society is in fact racist, fundamentally materialistic, and institutionally structured to protect vested interests." (Karier, 1973) Their history of education research is a tale of servility to powerful alliances of economic and political elites. Within such an analysis, most recently expressed by Bowles and Gintis (1976), education is a passive instrument of the economy whose main function is to prepare the labour force for a self-denying role in the maximisation of profits for the 'haves'. Mind you, critics of the marxist view are quick to point out that such an assertion needs to be substantiated, and has not been. O'Keefe (1978) for instance reviewing the Bowles and Gintis treatise, is scathing: "They do not begin to develop a sophisticated model of the structure of decisionmaking, with its immensely complicated network of wealth, income, knowledge, status and political power." But those of us, and I include myself, who find the marxist analysis either too reductionist or too depressing

should note that we too lack a sophisticated model of the decision-making process to which our work is assumed to relate. Note too that they 'explain' the gap, while we do not. In any case, even if we are not the 'white Uncle Toms' so scathingly denounced by Martin Nicolaus in his unscheduled address to the 1968 Meeting of the American Sociology Association (Nicolaus, 1969) it is far from easy to dismiss such accusations by pointing to the social benefits of our efforts. We need to examine more closely than we have in the past the political assumptions upon which we rest our case. Perhaps, in these days of massive state management and concentration of capital ownership, we are too complacent about both the capacity and the will of the liberal democratic state to deliver the good society. And perhaps we need reminding, as Macpherson says, that democracy is not a mere mechanism of authorisation. " . . . the egalitarian principle inherent in democracy requires not only 'one man, one vote' but also 'one man, one equally effective right to live as humanly as he may wish' " (Macpherson, 1973).

Problems of delivery, the delivery of social services that is, could of course be due to lack of investment in evaluation, but this argument is losing what force it once had as social policy evaluation booms in the western nations. It is big business, getting bigger, recruiting more and more social scientists to man the feedback loops of social system managers. In the USA alone more than one thousand evaluation studies jam the in-trays of federal agencies every year (Abt, 1976). Since 1969 that country has spent 70 million dollars a year on educational policy experiments alone, including substantial allocations to their evaluation (Cohen and Garet, 1975). In Europe the quantity is more modest, but not the growth curve. The boom spans the industrial nations. Nobody questions the need for policy evaluation or underestimates the problem of managing the levelling up process in the complex socio-economic organisations in which we now live. And evaluation appears to offer a means of harnessing science to the cause of bringing about a more equitable distribution

of goods and opportunities through effective policies. The prospect is one of bringing more rationality, objectivity, legitimacy and accountability, as well as more information, into the processes of policy making.

But already there is enough evidence to suggest quite a serious flaw in the functioning of this rational model. The flaw lies in the apparent failure of policymakers to utilise evaluation. Clark Abt estimates (Abt, 1976) that less than one per cent of evaluation research reached what he called "the potential pay-off of policy application". Now Abt was generalising from an overview of the approximately one thousand evaluation studies of U.S.A. social action programmes completed each year for the federal bureaucracy, but there is no compelling reason to believe that the figure would vary significantly if restricted to the category of educational evaluations, or that a survey of British or Canadian evaluation studies would yield a different conclusion. Evaluation studies are not used, at least in ways which are recognisably consonant with the model of rational decision-making within which they are typically conceived and carried out.

Walter Worth (1977), quoting evidence from a recent study (Caplan et al, 1975) makes the same point, but his analysis of this malfunction goes beyond Abt's. Whereas Abt calls for a streamlining of the evaluation processes of production and dissemination, emphasising what I think Worth would call a 'policy-maker constraint' theory of non-utilisation, Worth himself is more sceptical of the rational possibilities, seeing policy formation as 'a (political) process of conflict management and consensus building.' The researcher who seeks influence, he suggests, has to learn the rules of the bargaining game and work within them. He advocates a political model of research/evaluation, while reminding us gently in a final remark not to lose sight of our commitment to the cause of rationality.

'The bargaining game' is an evocative concept, one which we should keep in mind when we turn, as we now do, to look at some striking developments in the nature and balance of relationships between the information-consuming and the information-producing agencies. Firstly we should note that the growing emphasis on policy research and evaluation is diverting funds away from other areas of research and evaluation, especially basic research. Secondly as the Norwegian Oyen (1976) points out, there has been a shift in control away from the universities and nearer to the centres of political power. In Britain, for example, following the Rothschild Report (1971) there is more emphasis on customer-contract research in which the sponsor, usually the bureaucracy, defines the nature and sometimes the structure of the problem. Evaluation sponsorship is increasingly the preserve of government agencies, including the QUANGO* style agency now favoured as an ad hoc task force to tackle pressing social problems. Evaluation practice is decreasingly the preserve of academia as ministries expand their own in-house capability or, as in the U.S.A., turn to the profit-making evaluation firms that have sprung up in response to commercial opportunities generated by the Boom. The European Economic Community also, in its first major educational policy evaluation, launched this year, has entrusted the programme to a private company which has university academics in the nine memberstates under contract to carry out evaluation under its oversight. Such companies are another form of QUANGO, dominated by the problems of centralised management and vulnerable to any loss of patronage.

Meanwhile the private foundations, conceivably and sometimes professedly sponsors of non-conformist enquiry, but more vulnerable than ever to accusations of political meddling, are developing more collaborative

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*Quasi non-governmental organisation

roles in a process that is evolving rapidly into a bureaucratic self-assessment procedure. Even academia, still despite these trends the main contractor for policy evaluation studies but not insensitive to the spoor of the beckoning dollar (in the form, say of 80% overheads in federal grants) yields to no-one in its docility to managerial values, becoming daily more of an answering than a questioning service to those who command a nation's resources.

These are worrying trends, I think, not least because they seem to have received less attention than they merit. Perhaps we should, in the light of them, feel less than dismayed by the non-utilisation of evaluation reports, since in aggregation at least such trends amount to a serious erosion of even the notional safeguards offered by university-based and university-controlled research. To those of radical political persuasion of course these trends in power relationships amount to no more than a shift in the explicitness of the means by which policy critique is controlled by power elites. But even those of us who still pin their faith on facilitating effective action by legitimate authority must pause before this increasing concentration of power. Should it continue, we shall soon be able to say that in no sphere of our social life is the construction of its nature, significance and options more centralised than in the activity we have come to call 'policy' or 'programme' evaluation.

And here's the rub. There is no policy evaluation, despite the popularity of this nomenclature and the vast sums invested in its name. What we have by and large is evaluation of the effects of policy upon those who are declared to be its intended beneficiaries. We evaluate the instruments of policy, the programmes of social action which emanate from agency offices. Often our enquiries are even more narrowly focalised, searching only for those effects which tell us whether programmes have or have not achieved their

stated goals, ignoring effects which are not goal-related. What we seldom contemplate, and even more rarely achieve with any degree of penetration, is the evaluation of the origins or processes of policy formulation. There is more than a grain of truth in Nicolaus's condemnation of the social scientist as a man with 'palms upward, eyes downward' (Nicolaus, op. cit.) We evaluate the managed, not the managers, the objects of policy and not the makers, the 'have nots' not the 'haves'. With of course the best of intentions, as we already explained to the children. But good intentions are not enough. Maybe the time has come for us to look up as well as down, to raise our political horizons.

Looking up for a change

This will not be easy. As Pondy (1977) remarks "A program evaluation strategy that could potentially conclude that agency funds could have been better spent on some other program is not likely to survive selection procedures." To go further one could say that an evaluation perspective which implicitly defines the policymaking process as a choice among alternatives will have even greater difficulty in gaining acceptance. But nothing less is needed now. Political meddling? Of course. Evaluation is an inescapably political activity. But it can and should in my view remain a political service. The issue is at what level of political instrumentality we should define our role. There is now a general consensus of right and left in politics that contemporary concentrations of power constitute a threat to the feasibility of the liberal-democratic state, and a growing sense of reduced responsiveness on the part of the powerful to the needs of the powerless, the poor, the disadvantaged. In such circumstances there is an urgent need for us to re-examine our contract, to use what bargaining power we can muster to raise our sights.

One alternative reaction to the problem is to advocate partisan investigation, as Becker has done:

> "To have values or not to have values:
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> the question is always with us when sociologists undertake to study problems that have relevance to the world we live in . . .
>
> But the dilemma does not exist since it is not possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies . . .
>
> The question is not whether we should take sides, but rather whose side are we on?"
>
> (Becker, 1967)

This is more or less what Nicolaus endorses when he advises young radicals to take the agency money and subvert the system. I am not yet ready to abandon the ideal of evaluation as a disinterested service to democratic societies. The options are not limited to a choice between strengthening or subverting existing power relationships, although the history of evaluation might indicate otherwise. I said earlier that the radical critics had failed to substantiate their thesis about the relationship between education and the economy, and pointed out that the same could be said of those of us who reject the thesis. This suggests one obvious point of departure for a new political direction in evaluation. We can only escape the options of consolidating or subverting the status quo by enlarging our definitions of what is to be evaluated. If evaluation is concerned as I think most of us would agree with choice between alternative actions, it should be concerned not just with choices within given programmes (formative evaluation) nor choices between programmes (summative evaluation) but with choices between policies and choices between policy-making processes (and this I would call a defensible form of political evaluation). We can at least begin by raising our present sights until they

encompass the processes of policy-making that relate to the formulation of the particular programmes we contract to study. In this way we can begin to contribute to the construction of a descriptive model of the decision-making process whose structure, functioning and adequacy for the purposes and intents of a democratic society we have largely taken for granted. "We evaluation methodologists," says Campbell, "are in fact designing alternative political systems." (Campbell, 1977) I think he has the facts wrong. Our relationship to the political system has consistently functioned within constraints imposed by powerful interest groups within our varying democracies. The trends in evaluation sponsorship and control to which I have drawn attention in this paper suggest a strengthening rather than a weakening of these constraints. There is however still, in my view, sufficient fluidity and uncertainty in the situation to suggest that we could begin to reverse these trends, and to achieve for evaluation a degree of independence that would enable us to provide, for all the actors in our societies, a disinterested source of information about the origins, processes and effects of social action. This involves us in challenging monopolies of various kinds - of problem definition, of issue formulation, of data control, of information utilisation. We are not just in the business of helping some people to make educational choices within their present responsibilities and opportunities. We are also in the business of helping all our peoples to choose between alternative societies.

What hope is there that such a concept of the evaluator's role could ever gain acceptance, or any purchase within systems of power relationships whose durability is well attested? Not much perhaps, but we can take some strength and some hope from those theorists of democracy, like Macpherson, who think that the liberal-demo state is reaching a point where it really will have to make good its rhetoric of intent. "I am arguing that we are reaching a level of productivity at which the maximisation of human powers in the descriptive sense

can take over as the criterion of the good society, and that in the present world climate it will have to be an egalitarian maximisation of powers. . . . The West will, I think, be reduced to competing morally. It will, that is to say, have to compete in the quality of life it makes possible for its citizens . . . The competition is not between West and East for the favour of any third party; it is between the leaders, the holders of political power, in both East and West, for the support of their own people." (Macpherson, op. cit.)

If Macpherson is right, there may in the near future be more bargaining power than we now assume. There may even be more now. If so it could provide us with opportunities to make a more effective contribution than we so far have to reducing the gap in all our societies between those who have and those who have not. This is not to take sides; it is to take seriously, rather than for granted, the public rhetoric of the liberal democratic state.

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