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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (August, 2023)

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Juan Pablo Pardo-Guerra’s *The Quantified Scholar: How Research Evaluations Transformed the British Social Sciences* deftly weaves together findings from a sophisticated mix of methods into a crisply written, engaging, and thought-provoking contribution to the sociology of science. It testifies to the potential of big data computational techniques to document changes in the social sciences, while interviews and the author’s own reflexivity concretely illuminate how the periodic research evaluation process mandated by the British state is experienced in practice. While I have some questions about the book’s stronger causal claims ascribing changes in the social sciences to research evaluations, readers interested in either of these domains have much to learn, enjoy, and admire in Pardo-Guerra’s substantively and methodologically striking book.

The ability of computational social science to craft a “bird’s-eye view” of trends in social science itself is compellingly demonstrated through clear diagrams and prose that make findings based on an impressively large original data set accessible to nontechnical readers (p. 68). Data on over 16,500 British social scientists from four disciplines (anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology) is drawn from about 150,000 records in the Social Science Citation Index from 1979 to 2018. This enables quantifying and diagraming major academic trends of recent decades, such as the percent of female faculty approximately doubling and production per scholar of peer-reviewed articles (seen in figures 3.2 and 3.3, pp. 75-76) approximately tripling. This data rich approach persuasively documents both parallel trends across disciplines and persistent cross-disciplinary differences, such as sociology persistently having the highest percent female faculty.

Over half the records (around 81,000) included abstracts, which Pardo-Guerra and his assistants used to analyze changes in the content of each discipline. Through computational text analysis they crafted measures of the similarity of individual scholars to others in their departments and the typicality of departments relative to one another. The findings again richly convey both
cross-disciplinary differences, such as high typicality departments being much more common in economics than anthropology, and parallel trends, such as increasing homogeneity in all four disciplines. For Pardo-Guerra, the parallel trend toward “convergence, homogeneity, and increasingly similar framings of big problems and tough questions” across all four social sciences studied is his most important and troubling finding (p. 192). To explain this parallel trend across disciplines requires turning to a cause or causes external to any one of them.

As his book’s subtitle announces, Pardo-Guerra causally ascribes changes in the social sciences to the research evaluations mandated by the British state since the mid-1980s. Conceptualizing these evaluations as a striking “case” of the “quantification” of scholarship, he alternates between making causal claims about the impact of the research evaluations and about the impact of quantification (p. 5). Even as Pardo-Guerra acknowledges that the evaluations he studies “are just a tiny sliver” of the modes of quantification “that suffuse and surround the work of contemporary academics,” the ease with which he alternates among causal claims and the bold stating of certain claims raises a series of concerns for me (p. 170). Is he asserting that the British research evaluations are typical of quantification more generally; an extreme case of quantification at its most transformative; or a deviant case with different effects or mechanisms than other modes of quantification that are not state mandated, that are not organized on disciplinary lines, or that quantify the properties of journals or individuals rather than departments? To what extent are the changes documented in the British social sciences in recent decades due to research evaluations, to other modes of quantification, or to other potential causes altogether? If we imagine a counterfactual academia free of quantification, would decades of overproducing PhDs relative to academic positions, and globalization of the job market, still have led to those hired into research-active positions being incentivized to publish as much as possible and in prestigious outlets?

My concern is not that Pardo-Guerra does not address these questions. It is that the oversell in his book’s subtitle (“research evaluations transformed the British social sciences”) and opening and concluding claims appear to imply that the cause he presents is the sole (or primary) rather than merely one plausible cause of changes in the social sciences. This misdirects readers from the character and strengths of the book. This is not a study estimating the amount of change in a dependent variable to be attributed to one causal variable rather than another. It is a causal process study that triangulates a rich mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence to establish the plausibility of a “causal connection between the quantification of academic work and changes in the scholarly landscape,” to flesh out the specific causal processes through which this connection could operate, and to give evidence of the operation of these in the British case (p. 104). The book excels, for example, as it integrates individual and departmental-level data to document an “epistemic sorting” process in which scholars who change jobs “more often move from atypical to typical departments and from settings of higher similarity to ones in which their expertise is less redundant” (p. 97). In sum, the book’s data and research design are well crafted to answer the “how” that begins its subtitle, not to answer “to what extent” questions, and the reader must discount its implied answers to such questions to appreciate the things it does so very well.

I am especially impressed to see a scholar at the cutting edge of computational techniques make reflexivity a core through-thread of his work. Rather than bracket off his own connection to his research into a foreword or footnotes, Pardo-Guerra foregrounds how his book’s “framing, methods, and claims encode the movements and encounters of my own career” (p. 100). He opens his book with a personal recounting of a
faculty meeting of the Sociology Department at the London School of Economics and later shares more fully how he and his colleagues approached the 2014 round of research evaluation against the backdrop of having been the lowest-ranked unit in the school in the prior round. Through sharing his experiences, Pardo-Guerra enacts and supports his view of “quantification not as an external force dictated by a bureaucratic state or a neoliberal organization but as resonance box invited into our workplace, where our own virtues and vices are too often amplified” (p. 193).

Alongside his experiences, Pardo-Guerra also reflexively explicates his beliefs. He openly avows his “underlying value claim” of the “worth in intellectual diversity and scientific serendipity” while also spotlighting how his “understanding of research evaluations shifted” as he “spoke with academics for this book” (pp. 10, 43-44). The transparency of Pardo-Guerra’s recounting of how specific interviews shifted his thinking deepened my trust in him as a guide to the research evaluation process and my support for his argument that “assessments are not good or bad in any absolute categorical value” (p. 47). Conveying the views of those who see research evaluations as advancing a “formal equality” capable of challenging older hierarchies—for example, by advancing opportunities for women and minorities and non-Oxbridge institutions—led me to read Pardo-Guerra’s own expressions of concern about the process as considered judgments rather than personal gripes (p. 174).

In addition to enhancing both the style and substance of his book, Pardo-Guerra’s reflexivity sets up his clarion call for scholars “to display and practice solidarity with peers and colleagues as a matter of principle” (pp. 186-87). Throughout the book, he previews his advocacy of “cultivating reflexive solidarities” through recurring usage of “our” (p. 188) (for examples, see the strings of “our” clauses on pp. 28, 100, and 186). In closing, let me make my own reflexive turn and discuss how I reacted to these “our” clauses, which usually generalized the labor conditions of research faculty. Rather than experience them as inclusive, they instead led me to question whether I, as the holder of a teaching faculty position, fell beyond their reach. I responded the same way to generalized statements about the “scholar” and “academics” that spotlighted research. While I would like to see myself in those words, I did not see the conditions of my own labor in the ways that Pardo-Guerra used them. Reading his book as a teaching faculty member, I wanted to know what proportion of staff in the British social sciences hold the kind of research-active positions he centers, how that proportion has changed across the decades studied, and how research evaluations might promote the division of labor between research and teaching positions. These are, of course, questions from my position, not Pardo-Guerra’s. But giving content to his call for “solidarity with peers and colleagues” requires speaking frankly about whether peers and colleagues are separate categories, with the holders of research positions recognizing one another as “academic peers” but viewing holders of teaching positions as simply “colleagues” or “fellow travelers” (p. 186)? Considering the division of labor in today’s academy could even lead us to ask if the social sciences that teaching faculty (with their higher teaching loads) present to students, and embody for them, might be less homogenous and freer from the pressure to chase the latest methodological or theoretical fad than the academic research journal articles that Pardo-Guerra bases his generalizations about the British social sciences on.
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