EDITORIAL

truth, conventional wisdoms and interdisciplinarity in political science

The growing trend to measure academic performance internationally reminds us of one of the opening scenes in the film, *The Dead Poets Society* (1989). In that, an English teacher, John Keating (played by Robin Williams), has his pupils read (and then rip up) the introductory chapter of a book, *Understanding Poetry*, by Dr J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D., which describes how to rate the quality of a poem by placing it on a scale and assigning it a number. Readers of *EPS* may find current obsessions with performance measurement as objectionable as Keating found the mathematical approach to literary criticism; for the approach represents the evasion of any *substantive* engagement of those doing the measuring with those whose performance is being measured.

This is not in any sense to criticise the authors of the three important articles we publish here – Buhaug *et al* (2009), Elgie and McMenamin (2009) and Harguindeguy and Canton (2009) – which have in common the assessment of performance – respectively, of individuals, of departments, and of an entire sub-discipline – through the deployment of various quantitative indicators of research output. But it is to suggest that performance assessment (bound up, as it is, with the growing commercialisation of higher education) sits uneasily with fidelity to the basic commitment underlying the academic calling – namely, that the *only* yardstick by which work ought to be evaluated is in terms of the assessor's

substantive judgement about the extent to which the work brings us closer to the truth.

Should we or should we not, therefore, be expressing satisfaction in the news that *EPS* has, from 2009, been included in the Social Science Citation Index? We leave readers to judge, but would comment that, if this index is primarily about 'impact', then the inclusion of *EPS* can be seen as fitting testimony both to the range of high-quality, topical articles submitted to the journal in the recent past, and to the growing maturity of European Political Science as a self-conscious community of practitioners.

The teaching articles, by Lelieveldt and Rossen (2009) and Goverde and Berndtson (2009), are significant because of the way they offer, to the political science community, original and exciting ideas for approaching teaching in two increasingly important but difficult-to-handle areas, namely, research methods and the needs of overseas exchange students. On the one hand, research methods pose particularly great challenges for the standard didactic approaches of transferring technical information to students – particularly in view of the growing *diversity* in the backgrounds of students taking these courses, especially at Masters' level (Barraket, 2005: 67). On the other hand, precisely because they pose questions about their relevance to students' substantive concerns and objectives, research methods offer considerable

opportunities for the development of new, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

In describing the logistics of organising an exit poll for research methods students, Lelieveldt and Rossen exemplify this approach perfectly – while offering a number of practical tricks and tips for others to try. Meanwhile, Goverde and Berndtson offer something similar with their description of how they have met the challenge of – among others – the multidisciplinary backgrounds of exchange students by using public space to get learners to engage with important issues of political theory and philosophy.

Frazer Egerton's article is a response to the burgeoning field of critical terrorism studies and to the symposium on the subject published in this journal (Jackson, 2007). Egerton (2009) initiates a much-needed debate about what a 'critical' approach *is* exactly. As he points out, many of the efforts to establish a critical approach have compiled lists of the supposed wrongs of a mainstream against which they are apparently rebelling; but they often fail clearly to specify the assumptions underlying the approach they wish to contest. We would argue that the distinction between 'orthodox' and 'critical' approaches has to be built on the contrasting ontological assumptions underlying the two rather than upon the contrasting normative choices of orthodox and critical theorists: yes, theories *are* never neutral, but we would question the suggestion that critical approaches *must* have the notion of 'emancipation' as their objective. *Why* should they? For us, the distinction between the two approaches revolves around whether we are willing to accept that the concept of 'terrorism' can refer to an extra-discursive object of knowledge – or whether we reject this as a possibility and therefore see it as a concept variously deployed by political actors themselves to advance their goals and manage power relation-

ships. From *that* perspective, the critical agenda then becomes one of exploring how the concept is deployed discursively (by politicians, other academics, the mass media and so on) – and with what consequences. We look forward to receiving other contributions to this debate.

The symposium guest-edited by Alex Warleigh-Lack and Michelle Cini is important because it recognises the need for political science to engage with other disciplines if it is to be able to provide more comprehensive answers to complex questions. There are now multiple pressures on the discipline to engage in interdisciplinarity – 'the search for new or more complete knowledge, responding to new issues that cross established disciplinary boundaries (climate change politics, for example), and the drive towards "user focus" on the part of many research funders' (Warleigh and Cini, 2009: 4). As they go on to point out, however, the potential benefits of, as well as the potential obstacles to, interdisciplinarity are both considerable and wide ranging, and the Symposium hosts a valuable discussion of these and other issues.

If interdisciplinarity is partly a response to the need for political science to become more 'user focused', then Nils Muiznieks' (2009) contribution on the theme of the political scientist as professional politician is pertinent, and fits in with other articles previously published in the journal (Pasquino, 2005; Peterson, 2008). These contributions help to raise political scientists' visibility in the 'city' by reviewing the problems in relation to which the contribution of the discipline is essential. We hope to see more of such articles in future issues of the journal.

This is the first issue which will be distributed to ECPR members on a new basis to meet the changing demands of our readers (as outlined by Peter Kennealy, 2008). We hope that this new arrangement will see further increases in

both readership and the submission of articles promoting important debates about the discipline of political science. If any readers or ECPR members are unclear about the different ways in which they can receive *EPS*, they should not hesitate to contact eps@salford.ac.uk for clarification.

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