
Interview with Professor Hilary Land

Part 6: on changing role of academia

Do you think that that kind of pattern has gone out of academia now, so that people are less interested in changing the world?

Well yes and no. I mean selective research assessment exercise, these days you have to show what impact your research has had on policy, so there's a kind of assumption that it should and does have impact on policy, and quick, very rapid impact. I mean I think I don't have a problem about hoping that policy has an impact, but sometimes you have to wait a very long time. It's not going to show up next year, or even necessarily in five years' time, you're in for the long haul and I think the way we fund research now, the things that might take quite a long time before they bear fruit aren't getting funded. And sadly academics are so much more pressured, because staff student ratios have gone up and everything, they don't have the spare time that I had, quote spare, but you know, I had time to write.

I could write what I wanted about. I didn't get, I didn't have research grants, I had a couple of research fellowships, one from the SRC and one from Nuffield, and then I shared a bit of a grant with Jane Lewis to write the study of lone mothers with Kath Kiernan in the late '90s, but apart from that I never had grants. I just had time to do it, and you don't have that sort of chance these days, it seems to me. Academics have to account for all their time, and it's either funded by a grant or you're doing your teaching or you're doing your admin and there's not much left for anything else really. So you know, it's a different situation altogether, but there is an assumption that social science should have an impact on policy, otherwise it shouldn't be funded, but I think the way they measure it and the kind of timescale is completely wrong. So it's a kind of double bind really.

When I was sorting out Peter Townsend's books and everything in his cupboard, I just had a feeling in the room that people were very ambitious at that time, that they really wanted to change the world, and then when I came out of the cupboard, it didn't seem the same, that people are sort of, you know, academics, anyway, they don't seem to be

so ambitious. Do you think that's true, or do you think things have changed?

Well it's interesting because we were talking about this at a meeting of the Feminist Archive last week, and talking about the second wave movement that I was very involved in with what's happening now. And I think part of the difference now is that I mean both Brian and Peter and Richard Titmuss were very involved with the Labour party, and certainly the women's movement in the '70s, a lot of it, not all of it but a lot of it, had substantial connections with the trade unions movement. And although there were male chauvinist pigs amongst the trade union movement who certainly didn't like family allowance or didn't want equal pay and so on, there were those who did, and so you felt that you were in it together. There wasn't, you weren't a sort of lone set of researchers or feminists or whatever sort of shouting in the wind, or just getting, appearing on telly from time to time or having an article in The Guardian or something.

There was a movement which connected with other movements, and it seems to me that's one of the differences now, that people, I doubt whether very many academics are active in the Labour party or involved with the local council, because local councils have so little power to do what they really want, because they can no longer, they don't control their resources anymore. They've got more responsibilities but they don't have the money and they don't have the ability to raise the money that they had in the '60s and '70s. I mean most of local government funding they had control over, they raised it themselves, and only a minority of their budgets came from central government. Now it's the other way around.

So you haven't got the same levers on the system that would actually make a change, if you see what I mean, so my guess would be that researchers aren't as, have a much more narrow view of change. Maybe it's more realistic, I don't know, but we certainly felt in the '70s that we were part of something much bigger and that collectively we could make a difference, and in some respects we did. Not in others, by any means, but in some respects we made a difference. So I don't know, I guess that's a question for the historians in 20, 30 years' time.

Thank you.