

## Discussion on Schmidt

Harald Baldersheim, Norwegian Research Centre in Organisation and Management, Bergen

The gift for spotting ghosts depends, most of all, on a pre-established belief in ghosts. If you *believe* they exist, you will see them everywhere. And the firmer your belief is, the more you will be able to spot ghosts also in broad daylight, not only in your nightmares. The article on 'Nordic Social Science Research and the American Nightmare' is a good illustration of a well-developed capacity for ghost-spotting under daylight conditions.

The article is premised on C. Wright-Mills's fear that in large-scale research programmes, particularly when they are supported by the political establishment, critique, controversy, and theory-building tend to be replaced by toothless empiricism or outright conformism. The establishment may even be able to buy the research results it desires: who pays the piper decides the tune. The university is an institutional safeguard against undue pressures on individual researchers. The further away from the university contract research is carried out, the greater is the threat to the intellectual independence of researchers. Since the Norwegian LOS-programme is the one that is organised with the weakest links to the university system, according to Schmidt, it is also the one that stands in the greatest danger of becoming absorbed by the powers-that-be.

The article raises important issues about the organisation of applied social-research programmes, particularly issues concerning the independence and neutrality of researchers. An opportunity to debate these issues in a Nordic context is most welcome. I shall not deal with Schmidt's exposition of the four Nordic research programmes in any detail, although I find his presentation superficial. The LOS centre in Bergen, for example, is much more closely integrated into the University and the Business School and their normal functions than he seems to be aware of. Most of the researchers at the Centre, but also those working in other parts of the programme, are university teachers engaged by the programme only temporarily. Others do their LOS projects as a part of their normal research duties. Also, the picture of bureaucratisation and technocratisation painted by Schmidt is a wild exaggeration.

Admittedly, the LOS programme has offered the opportunity to create research environments with better staffing than is normally the case in social science university departments. Up till now, a serious handicap for the development of the social sciences in universities has been the departments' under-bureaucratisation, i.e. a lack of supportive staff. The departments have often over-extended their commitments relative to their resources. In the universities, the social sciences have always been the poor cousins. The LOS programme is organised in such a manner that it permits its staff to do research, for once, in an environment with proper infrastructure. The university departments also benefit since academics on leave continue some of their university duties, for example, supervising students.

A few comments on Schmidt's 'nightmare' theme are also called for: the danger that applied contract research engenders for critique and independent thought. At the outset, I concede that, for example, ministries, as some of the most experienced research buyers, are no innocents. They know what kind of research they want and, sometimes, also what sort of answers they would like to have. They may not be above communicating their views to the researchers. However, it is an unwarranted simplification of reality to maintain that the institutional independence of universities is the only or the most important safeguard of academic freedom. I should like to outline a few other mechanisms that help researchers to preserve their objectivity and neutrality when doing research in a situation surrounded by vested interests.

First, the political establishment, and the central administration in particular, is not the monolithic giant C. Wright Mills made it out to be. At least it is not so in Scandinavia. The central administration is a conglomerate of competing interests and values. Ministries are institutional frameworks around a plurality of competing interests. When a research programme is expected to serve several governmental institutions, a process of bargaining takes place among the institutions as to what the research agenda should look like. Each institution will seek to ensure that no other single institution's values dominate the agenda. The bargaining process also gives the researchers leeway to interpret the agenda and freedom to translate the agenda into research questions.

Second, if a governmental institution feels that a research report is biased in favour of another institution, with which it is having an argument, the former can be relied upon to say so, and to have other researchers scrutinising the piece of research in question. Knowing that peers may be called in to review one's work in a highly publicised conflict situation may have a disciplinary effect on researchers just as powerful as the normal academic procedures of peer review, which are resorted to when, for example, university positions are to be filled or articles are submitted for publication in scientific journals.

Third, some of the institutions doing research for the LOS programme are

institutes that depend on contracts from a multitude of research buyers. They have to survive in the market-place for research. Are they more exposed to intimidation and inclined to conformity? Not necessarily. Those researchers that are most dependent upon selling their research in the market-place (whether to a research council or to an individual buyer like a ministry) may be especially motivated to preserve their objectivity and neutrality in the face of, for example, inter-ministry rivalries. If they acquire a reputation for partiality, they will be seriously handicapped in their efforts to obtain new research contracts the next time around. Of course, a properly functioning market for research is required to make this mechanism have the desired effects in full measure. Cartelisation on either the supply or demand side may pervert it.

So there are more mechanisms than is commonly acknowledged making for independence and neutrality in applied research. Perhaps some of them are just as important as the institutional safety-belts of university freedom. But since ghosts are rarely exorcised by rational argumentation, some people may very well continue to have their nightmares on behalf of applied research and large research programmes. Some even make a living out of telling ghost stories. However, if such nightmares keep an important debate alive and going, it is demonstrated, once more, that even irrationalities may serve a socially useful purpose.

Knut Grøholt, Chairman of the LOS-Committee  
Tore Abrahamsen, Director, The Norwegian Research Council for Applied Social Science (NORAS), Oslo

The article 'Nordic Social Science Research and the American Nightmare' gives a useful overview over four major projects in social science in the Nordic countries. The classification of the projects with reference to four models – the Center, Contract, Network, and Department models – gives an opportunity to reflect on conditions for organizing research projects.

The author's description of the Norwegian project 'Organization and Management' (LOS) is unfortunately rather insufficient. The analysis of causes and effects of the different models is therefore questionable, at least when it comes to the Norwegian project. When describing the organization of the LOS project, it is important to bear in mind the two different ways in which the research funds are granted. About two-thirds of the means available are channeled into universities and research institutes and one-third to the LOS Centre (The Norwegian Centre for Organization and Management, set up in the city of Bergen, is an independent research centre under NORAS, with its