



# Big ideas

The nature of a contemporary 'knowledge society' and the changing role that ideas and intellectuals play in the public sphere is increasingly important – and not only for social scientists. It is also highly debatable. One line of thought argues that the onset of knowledge society heralds the end of ideology and its replacement by specialist piecemeal expertise. Others respond that we still live in a society that is driven, though perhaps only sporadically, by 'big ideas', related in various ways to different social interests and social divisions.

In this context, it is useful to examine how different sorts of social ideas actually emerge, develop and circulate. The public sphere today can plausibly be depicted as an increasingly deregulated 'market' for ideas, where ideas are 'floated' and 'promoted' with their advocates engaging in sustained 'branding' exercises. Their purpose is not so much to encapsulate truth and progress or to define values by which to live in the long term, but rather to be seen as 'agenda-setting' and 'making things happen' in the here and now.

Think-tanks such as Demos and universities such as the London School of Economics (LSE) have a reputation for producing ideas that influence current political and social thinking. Demos researchers and LSE academics are frequently quoted in the media and both institutions have been associated with a number of influential concepts, such as the 'Third Way'.

Public perception of such ideas changes over time, however, as an analysis of newspaper coverage of the

'Third Way' label between 1994 and 2002 shows. During the first years of Tony Blair's government, the 'Third Way' was portrayed in the press as a new and 'transformative' idea. After that it became a routine New Labour epithet, gradually slipping into the background. In academic literature, the 'Third Way' idea was sustained over a longer period and came to

## 'Joined up government'

constitute a sprawling debate about social and political values. Across both realms, 'Third Way' appears to be illustrative of a new type of flexible, 'inclusive', and pragmatic social idea, geared as much to the images and activities of its intellectual mediators and public 'users' as to its intrinsic coherence and worth. Oriented to an increasingly media-oriented world, such ideas 'splash' onto the discursive scene, are taken up by diverse audiences, and then progressively weaken in specific content and urgency.

'Third Way' is actually at the 'grand, slow' end of the spectrum, with *fast* ideas ('Cool Britannia'), and 'technical' ones ('baby bonds') often more to the fore. Their content and impact is intimately bound up with the networking and performance strengths of their *mediators*, and commitment to them is notably fluid and pragmatic.

Both LSE and Demos have distinctive 'ideas' self-images, and they work hard in various routine ways to maintain their brand identity. Indeed, they could be taken to signal an

increasing convergence in style and practice between universities and think-tanks. Especially under the directorship of Anthony Giddens, LSE's traditional reputation as a generator of policy-relevant ideas was given a modernising, quietly spectacular make-over. The School actively engages with journalists and politicians and lays claim to spheres of

influence in government, the City, and overseas. Its media profile, hugely successful public lectures series, and central place in the circuits of metropolitan professional life enables individual academics to enhance their own status and presence, which in turn consolidates the prominence of LSE as a whole.

In such ways, a publicity-oriented ideas culture has come to overlay, and to some extent outrun, the conventional academic culture at LSE. Its research centres are required to address users and disseminate ideas through targeted publications and seminars. Professional press officers and public relations trainers are employed. There is a generally positive attitude to the existence and work of think-tanks, and various research centres operate in 'quick response mode' producing briefing materials and public newsletters.

The 'think-tank-isation' of LSE cannot be pushed too far, however. It remains very decentralised, and academic freedom and quality remain paramount. Moreover, although there →

Why do some social and political ideas have more impact than others? Professor *Gregor McLennan* from the Department of Sociology led a social science faculty team which went behind closed doors at two prominent 'ideas' institutions to find out.

→ is increasing emphasis within LSE on innovation and development, the traditional academic mechanisms for ideas production – curricula, seminars, discipline-based affiliations – remain firmly in place.

Demos, for its part, has a reputation as the sort of outfit that actively courts media attention and busily promotes soundbite-style ideas. This isn't entirely fair. Certainly, in the mid-1990s, Demos was heavily associated with ideas that might serve the newly elected Blair government, circulating coinages such as 'rebranding Britain', 'joined-up government', and 'social entrepreneurship'. By taking the fast track to government personnel and

While the working culture at Demos differs from academia in many respects, there are some striking similarities. Curiously, the central ideas-generating mechanism within Demos and other think-tanks is the good old conventional *seminar*. Many academics write for Demos, and it pursues ways of gaining bona fide research funding. There is some truth, then, in the hypothesis that think-tanks and universities are converging, but the influence does run in both

## 'Rebranding Britain' and 'social entrepreneurship'

the key media players, Demos thereby also advertised itself as the place to go to for 'agenda-setting' dynamism.

From 1999, however, rather than directly catching the ear of government, Demos saw itself more as a 'hub' or 'broker' for ideas that could be used and developed among a range of civil society organisations. Its general themes and publications – around diverse topics such as educational reform, animal rights, civic participation, genetic engineering – retained a 'modernisers guide to ...' element, but this cannot be dismissed as straightforward New Labourism.

directions. More generally, the role of ideas and intellectuals in social change and political influence has become significantly more 'performative' and 'mediational'. ■

