What future for research in social sciences and the humanities in Europe?

Helga Nowotny’s recent article in the Guardian (http://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2013/sep/23/europe-social-sciences-humanities) gives a favourable image of the Social Sciences and the Humanities (SSH) research in Europe, in particular compared to the situation in the US.

The European Research Council, which Nowotny leads, indeed has been a beacon for SSH research. However, there are still serious grounds for concern about the future of SSH research in Europe.

Budget austerity in the Member States of the EU has taken its toll. The funding of SSH research in countries such as Spain, Ireland and France, as well as the new Member States, has been severely diminished.

At the EU level, there are also very serious threats to funding. Current proposals for SSH research in Horizon 2020 (particularly in the so-called Societal Challenge 6 “Europe in a Changing World: Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective societies”) which is the only policy-oriented and strongly interdisciplinary programme addressing issues such as education, unemployment, criminality, sustainable growth, tolerance among communities, migration, cultural heritage and the arts, indicate that SSH funding will be severely cut in comparison to its previous level in Framework Programme 7 (2007-2013).

In the aftermath of widespread criticism of its initial proposals (including an open letter signed by 25,000 researchers), the European Commission announced a specific ‘societal challenge’ to address the economic, social, cultural and political problems of European societies. This was clearly a crucial agenda given the drastic effects of the economic crisis. But even the very small research budget that was put aside for this (1.2% of the FP7 research budget) is now in danger of being heavily reduced by the proposal to allocate a substantial part of the funding to technology-driven projects and various other programmes such as COST that could not be fitted elsewhere. The Commission seems to regard SSH as a service function for other priorities, such as energy and transport, rather than as a means of addressing the acute social problems that Europe faces. Paradoxically, while announcing major policy initiatives with respect to poverty, employment, competitiveness and social investment, the Commission is failing to provide the research that is essential for making such policies effective.

In speeches to the British Academy and Royal Irish Academy in 2011 and 2013 respectively as well as in the course of her recent appearance at the Vilnius Conference in September 2013, the European Commissioner for Research and Innovation Máire Geoghegan-Quinn has stressed her strong support for social science and humanities research. Coherence between intentions and policies is now needed. We call on the Commissioner to give substance to her convictions and deliver the funding that the social sciences and humanities need to address the major issues of our time. At an absolute minimum the Commissioner must ensure the retention of the same level of funding for SSH policy relevant research as in the previous funding period and, if she is to be true to her expressed vision, to increase that level of funding.

Prof. Jutta Allmendinger, President of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Professor of Sociology at the Humboldt University, Berlin, DE

Prof. Francesco Billari, Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford, UK
Prof. Craig Calhoun, sociologist, Director of the London School of Economics, former president of the Social Science Research Council (USA), London, UK

Prof. Robert Erikson, Dr hc, FBA, Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm, Sweden. Fellow of the Swedish Academy, former Secretary General of the Swedish Council for Social Research and the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research

Prof. Paolo Federighi, Director of the Department of sciences of education and psychology, University of Florence, IT

Prof. Ramon Flecha, Professor of Sociology, University of Barcelona, ES

Prof. Duncan Gallie, CBE-FBA Professor of Sociology, Nuffield College, University of Oxford, UK

Prof. Didier Georgakakis, Professor of Political Science, University Paris 1 Sorbonne, FR, and Executive Member of the European Confederation of Political Science Associations

Prof. Maurice Godelier, Director of Studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, FR

Prof. Stefan Gradmann, Director of the University Library and Professor at the Faculty of Arts, Catholic University of Leuven, BE

Prof. Pierre-Cyrille Hautcoeur, economist, President of the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, FR

Prof. Svend Erik Larsen, Professor of Comparative Literature, Aarhus University, DK, and Chair of the Section for Literary and Theatrical Studies of the Academia Europaea

Prof. Helle Mathiasen, Professor and Research Programme Director, Faculty of Arts, and Center for Teaching Development and Digital Media, Aarhus University, DK

Prof. Brian Nolan, Principal of the College of Human Sciences, University College Dublin, IE

Prof. Wiemer Salverda, Director Emeritus of the Amsterdam Institute of Advanced Labour Studies, University of Amsterdam, NL

Prof. Gisèle Sapiro, Professor of sociology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Research Director at the CNRS, Director of the Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique, Paris, FR

Prof. José Vicente Serrao, Professor of History, ISCTE – Lisbon University Institute, PT