Generation Think: the role that precise criteria plays in judging the allocation of research funding and in choosing our 'bright young things'

by Blog Admin   July 18, 2011

Named as one of Britain's New Generation Thinkers, **Dr Jon Adams** *finds that the problems of selecting competition winners as 'the brightest of our bright young things', are a microcosm of those facing research funding bodies.*

There's a photograph, taken by Lord Snowdon in 1983, of Granta magazine's "Best of Young British Novelists." It's a group portrait – eighteen people looking as determinedly informal as the circumstances will permit.

The startling thing, given the date the photograph was taken, is the line-up. They include: Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Kasuo Ishiguro, Pat Barker, William Boyd, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Rose Tremain, and, on the list but not the photo (and thus getting used to being public and hidden at the same time), Salman Rushdie. Between them, the people in this photograph would claim four of the next twenty Booker prizes, and appear on the shortlist seventeen times. How prescient that list now seems, and how stupendously well judged.

I was recently in a superficially similar photograph. There are ten of us, and we are the BBC's "New Generation Thinkers." There I am, smiling, my hands in my pockets, stood unlike myself. My picture appeared on the front page of the *Guardian*, along with the nine other finalists from the AHRC/BBC Radio 3 "New Generation Thinkers" scheme.

"X Factor-style search for 10 academics from generation think" said the headline. The accompanying article began: "They are, in theory, the brightest of our bright young things." The article goes on to explain how more than a thousand applicants were whittled down to ten, and how the scheme gives us the opportunity to work with BBC producers to get our research on the radio, playing to an audience considerably larger than anything academic conferences and seminars have prepared us for.

The *Guardian* piece was a surprisingly prominent announcement and left me feeling a little embarrassed and vertiginously exposed: a medal is also a target, and inevitably not everyone agreed with the selection.

The role of selection critera

Are we really "the brightest of our bright young things," the best minds of our generation? Of course not. We weren't picked for that. We were picked because we met the quite narrow and precise criteria the competition sought: we were all current or former recipients of AHRC funding who had an interest in broadcasting our ideas to a wider audience. And our work sat in the overlap of interests that the AHRC and Radio 3 both wanted to promote.

If there is a weighting towards the arts, it's because Radio 3 is also weighted towards the arts. And, obviously, it's because the Arts and Humanities Research Council funds only arts and humanities. If you want to hear more natural and social scientists on the radio, petition the relevant UK research council to support a similar scheme. Complaining that there weren't any mathematicians or physicists misses the mark, as does complaining that they are all university researchers. These are not complaints about the selection but about the criteria used to make that selection.

Still, although the aim of that criticism was off, the dissatisfaction it springs from replicates in miniature a much bigger problem: what do we mean, in the twenty-first century, when we call someone a good thinker?

What would the ten best thinkers look like? In other words: if not us, who?

Selection as coronation

When *Granta* selected their 20 Young British Novelists in 1983, they did so with quite a good expectation of success. The Snowdon photo is a sort of set up, a fix. Like the premise of Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspect*s: everyone in the line-up is going to be significant precisely *because* they are in the line-up.

Granta's selection is also formative of the success it predicts. In other words, the style of those twenty novelists contributes to the definition of what good writing is. To an extent, what we mean when we say something is well written is that it reads like Julian Barnes or Martin Amis or Kasuo Ishiguro. Their style – and the style of other writers inducted through critical approval into the canon of Western literature – is constitutive of good writing. There isn't a template extrinsic to or antecedent of these writers. Rather, canonical authors create (or, at least, modify) the template with each book they write.

Above a certain threshold of competence, it doesn't really matter which novelists *Granta* picked: the selection was also a coronation.

And so of the astonishing perspicacity of the *Granta* judges all we can say is that they employ similar criteria as the judges for The Booker Prize. People look to the *Granta* selection to gauge what Booker-prize-winning fiction should be like. That perfectly coherent alternative criteria exist for measuring the success of fiction ought to be obvious: market forces favour Stephen King and Dan Brown above McEwan and Amis.

Internal criteria

In some competitions, the criteria are entirely internal. At Crufts, that oddly high-profile dog show, the judges have a picture (literally, a drawinComg) of an idealised "pedigree" dog, and a list of physical and temperamental traits. The 'Best of Breed' is the dog which most closely fits those criteria. The winner is the actual dog that most closely resembles the ideal dog. The actual traits are arbitrary with respect to Darwinian values (the winning dogs might and sometimes do have crippling congenital problems), all that matters is the tightness of the correspondence between actual and ideal.

So, how to classify a 'good' thinker?

Sadly, measuring what makes a good thinker isn't like this. We don't have a list of antecedent criteria that constitute a good thinker. There are lots of good thinkers, but it's not clear they have very much in common with one another. What traits link Richard Feynman with Peter Singer with Stephen Wolfram with John Maynard Keynes with Ludwig Wittengstein with Marshall McLuhan with Claude Levi-Strauss with Jaron Lanier? Are some, any, all, or none of these thinkers among the best of their generation? I am of course happy to concede that I am not one of the top ten thinkers of my generation. But I don't know who else to point to, and it's not clear how I'd go about persuading you to agree with any choices I did make.

In the end, despite the prominent headline, it matters very little to the wider academic community which ten finalists are selected to be New Generation Thinkers, or which criteria have been used to select us. But an analogous problem matters enormously: how best to allocate finite research funding? How, between the many projects and candidates, to select which should be supported and which left to atrophy? That is the decision that governments and funding bodies tasked with allocating scarce resources are required to make. And if we cannot manage even the minor task, how to accomplish the major one?

Dr Jon Adams is currently based in LSE's External Relations Division and was previously in LSE's Department of Economic History.

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