

Many Radstats members will have noticed a recent “changing of the guard” in the office of the RSS Chief Executive. Hetan Shah has held this post for the last eight years and has been an assiduous friend of Radical Statistics, but he has now left Errol Street to take up a similar post at the British Academy. We wish him well.

Hetan has already ‘gone native’ in his new academic habitat, and has written convincingly on the needs to use ‘soft’ sciences and the humanities in addressing world issues (Shah 2020): Dominic Cummings might have had data scientists, mathematicians and physicists in mind when he advertised for ‘wierdos and misfits’, Hetan writes; and certainly “data do have huge power to inform government policy”. However “(e)pidemics are social as well as biological phenomena”, and advances in mental health require understandings of social context. So too will the problems of antibiotic overuse and antimicrobial resistance. “Poverty and inequality call even more obviously for expertise beyond science and maths.”

Environmental issues, Hetan writes “are not just technical challenges that can be solved with a new invention”. Tackling climate change requires insights from psychology and sociology, which are also necessary to ensure that scientific and technological innovations have real impact. “That will probably require new narratives — the purview of rhetoric, literature, philosophy and even theology.”

Life-saving technologies have not been adopted. ‘Vaccine hesitancy’ is a social rather than a technical phenomenon. Solutions require anthropological insights, not just medical breakthroughs. “(S)ocial factors — cultural norms, educational understanding, kin and social networks, power dynamics, or simply the layout of a building — must be considered before policy can succeed. Blind faith in data science without understanding what data are missing, or how algorithms can exacerbate existing biases, can lead to policy failure.

“Downing Street is right to look for data scientists”, concludes Hetan, “but must not overlook the benefits brought by the humanities and social science”.

Hetan’s place at the RSS will be taken by Stian Westlake who comes from NESTA. He has co-authored the book “Capitalism without Capital” (Princeton, 2018). I liked his defence of “Brain-Rotting Clichés and Scientific Myths” (Westlake 2013). We shall see how that goes down in the RSS.

Westlake, Stian. 2013. “In Defence of Brain-Rotting Clichés and Scientific Myths.” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/oct/15/in-defence-of-brain-rotting-clichs-and-scientific-myths>.

Shah, Hetan. 2020. “Global Problems Need Social Science.” *Nature* 577 (7790): 295.