

ISSC-ICPHS workshop, Bergen 11 May 2009

“Humanities and Social Sciences: intersections and joined paradigms”

Helga Nowotny

**“Frontier Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities:
what does it mean, what can it mean?”**

Using the term ‘frontier research’ obviously means resorting to a metaphor: military in origin, it also invokes the famous manifesto written by Vannevar Bush in August 1945 “*Science – the Endless Frontier*”. Addressed to the President of the US it laid down the principles for restructuring US academic life and a few years later led to the establishment of the National Science Foundation. For the natural sciences the calling of an endless frontier, of moving into hitherto unknown territory of knowledge and of coming up with unexpected, major breakthroughs of discoveries, conveys all the excitement of research and of “doing science”. Admittedly, the association of ‘frontier’ within the SH is somewhat different. Instead of heroic adventure, it rather conjures conflict. Borders that divide come to mind and contested maps of historical and social configurations that continue to be redrawn. But the term may also signal that somewhere an outpost exists from which one can see farther. It may convey the aspirations of the poor and destitute and of all those who yearn to move across a frontier into a land that harbours the promises of a better life.

When the ERC adopted this term, its concerns were more pragmatic, but not less visionary: to fund – for the first time ever – basic, curiosity-driven research at EU level. This is truly bottom-up research without the constraints

associated with other parts of the FPs: no need to assemble a consortium, no thematic priorities, no waiting for the next call into which one's research project needs to be fitted. Instead, it is a programme focused upon an 'individual team' as the PI is called, perhaps with one or two post-docs or Ph.D. students in order to expand the PIs working capacity and to enable him or her to set her aspirations higher. Thus, the ERC is ideally fitted for the working habits also of scholars in the humanities where working alone is still more common (a trait shared with the mathematicians). There has never been any doubt that 'frontier research' would cover all fields of science and scholarship, in the inclusive sense of "Wissenschaft". And when it came to the first, preliminary division of budget across the three domains, Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences and Social Sciences and Humanities, my proposal for 15%, based on a rough estimate what was spent on competitive basic research in the SH around the world, was accepted – and continues to correspond to the number of applicants and the budget they ask for.

Time does not allow to describe in detail the set-up of the ERC panel structure, except in very brief terms. The SH domain is made up of six panels each consisting of twelve to fourteen members. Since one group of panels evaluates the Starting Grants for younger researchers and another set of panels alternates every year to evaluate the Advanced Grant applications for established researchers, the ERC currently has approximately two hundred twenty panelists in the SH domain alone. Each panel is multidisciplinary by definition and panel members must be knowledgeable about research fields outside their own specialty. The evaluation proceeds in two steps and only applications that have made it to the second step undergo

at this stage a more detailed evaluation by specialist reviewers. The ERC puts its trust into the excellence of its panels, asking them in turn to recognize excellence when they encounter it. For further information on the procedure, I must refer you to the ERC website, the descriptors of research fields covered by each panel and the guide for applicants. I would also like to draw your attention to the recently published book by Michèle Lamont, “How Professors Think”, a wonderful study on evaluative cultures and their at once pragmatic and emotional involvement with peer review.

It would be based on the wrong assumption to expect that the contours of a ‘frontier’ in SH knowledge emerge if one were to map the research themes of successful projects of the award winners since the establishment of the ERC in 2007. Soon there will be almost 600 Starting Grants for researchers who are three to eight years after their Ph. D (from 2010, two till ten years). and around the same number of Advanced Grants for established researchers. What has become clear is that the successful applicants are indeed top researcher and scholars. In the first pan-European competition ever they all succeeded to convince their peers of the quality, originality and significance of the work they seek to undertake. They are at the forefront because they will scrutinize, analyze and rework their research objects and materials with methods that are adequate to answer their problem. They will, as stated already by Max Weber, establish new conceptual interconnections of problems. “A new science emerges”, so Max Weber, “where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view”. Indeed, asking new questions is often the way forward towards opening up new points of view.

It is too early to give you an overview of which significant new points of view will emerge in the SH domain. There is great variation, which is not surprising given the heterogeneous nature of each panel. Two trends are visible however. One is a convergence, especially towards interlinking disciplines, be it within one panel, or across panels. There are also those, admittedly few, who venture outside the SH domain to link up with the natural sciences. This occurs in neuroeconomics, in the cognitive sciences, in linguistics and other fields. But the often voiced fears of a ‘naturalization’ of the SH are exaggerated. Bridging domains can also be interpreted as a move towards injecting social science knowledge into what now seems to be firmly anchored in the problem-space of the natural sciences. The social sciences, to take but one example, now have new kinds of data at their disposal, which allows them to engage in social network analysis, thereby using some of the tools and methods also employed by their colleagues in the natural sciences. Yet, the questions they ask (and social network analysis originated in sociology) are social sciences questions. The ‘capacity to borrow’, as I have called it elsewhere, works both ways. But there excellent projects that remain in the best scholarly tradition, especially in the humanities.

Among the patterns, that have emerged, there are also remarkable stable ones that show a greatly unequal distribution across EU member states and the associated countries. The Matthew Principle in science, described by Robert K. Merton some time ago, still holds. No big surprise therefore, yet the results are disquieting if seen in a larger context. Since the ERC is based on the principles of scientific excellence only, meaning that there is no ‘juste retour’ or affirmative action of any kind, stemming the flow of talent and

money against the Matthew principle must be undertaken elsewhere. Does a climate exist at a particular university so that young talents are recognized, cultivated and nurtured? Do young, aspiring researchers in the SH receive the careful supervision at Ph.D. level to which they are entitled and which will enable them to inhale a research culture of excellence, including the skills of how to write a research proposal (never a technical question alone, but mainly an intellectual)? Are they encouraged to go abroad and to get in touch with ideas and colleagues elsewhere? Mobility cuts in many ways and it is never a question of the mobility of persons only. Above all, it is about the mobility of ideas. To have sufficient mobility of ideas across Europe and to bring in ideas from outside, also entails the ability to cross linguistic and cultural barriers. How open is Europe in this respect?

This brings me to the second part of my contribution, the organization of the production of SH knowledge.

In terms of teaching, we all know that the ‘university (still) has departments’ meaning that teaching is largely organized along disciplinary lines. This is how it should be, if acquiring a disciplinary identity and the ability to comprehend as well as to discern what is a ‘good’ problem in one’s own discipline (the ‘basics’) is an integral part of intellectual and professional socialization taught at our universities. Yet, at the same time, there is an enormous variety and diversity across Europe of what is taught as belonging to which discipline or sub-discipline. What is lumped together in any one department or institute at a European university, any one course of study or curriculum, even bearing the same name, displays a stunning variation.

Moreover, there are disciplines that ‘export’ their knowledge into other disciplines or departments, e.g. sociology that can be found in health, organisations and management, or disciplines like anthropology or social geography with their capacity for borrowing and be borrowed from, to an equally amazing extent. Moving towards the humanities, one finds all over Europe as well as in the US a sprawling conglomerate, especially of cultural studies. This may, at least in part, explain, why cultural studies experience so many “turns” (linguistic, visual, pictorial, iconic, material, spatial...) often changing at a dizzying speed which leave one wondering whether the road is turning up or down.

Despite all this diversity, some themes and general directions stand out: questions of changing identities, interest in processes of exchange and transfer of knowledge, ideas, experience, concepts and material across the world and its regions; the entanglement of histories, implying that histories have been experienced, written and re-written depending on whose side it was made and experienced, and a recognition of the pressing need to re-think scales of time and space simultaneously at the beginning of the 21st century in its full globality.

What outlook is there for frontier research in the SH in the near future?

What can be done and what needs to be done?

I can only mention a few roads that are opening up right now. Foremost in my view is the necessity of beginning seriously with curriculum reform. The Bologna process so far was mainly concerned with getting its architecture into place. This was welcome in some places and continues to be resisted in

others. Even more important is it therefore to ask what kind of knowledge a curriculum should offer at the BA, MA and PhD level? How to prepare our graduates for the uncertainties that lie ahead for all of them? How to position each university with its own, distinctive profile in the wider European landscape? Curriculum reform is, arguably, the most challenging task that a university confronts. It needs to be addressed. For the SH this will entail some arduous choices of how to combine local and national with regional and global concerns and how to interweave practical-professional perspectives with intellectually more demanding but also more rewarding ones.

A second major concern is the need to improve our doctoral education and to create a stimulating, intellectually exciting atmosphere at our universities for young researchers, creating the basis for future SH knowledge production. The challenge to engage with colleagues, their knowledge and experience from other parts of the world starts right there and will become more pressing in the time to come. Thirdly, much can be said about the role and function of Institutes of Advanced Study and of other 'sites' which can act as breeding grounds for new ideas. In this respect, the humanities must better understand that one of their most precious resources are the research infrastructures (archives, libraries, museums and collections etc) in which the objects, materials and methods of their knowledge are stored, preserved, curated. They should be used in a much more efficient and open, shared way.

Let me end by restating my firm conviction that the frontier of SH knowledge is right there in front of our eyes, in the interlinkages of concepts

and new methods in asking new questions. It is hidden in the wealth of material of our global cultural heritage. It is waiting to be discovered by exchanging ‘our’ and ‘their’ knowledge and experience in other parts of the world as well as in our own backyard. This is an exciting undertaking. The knowledge frontier opened up by the ERC is to be explored by individuals. Yet they depend on the collective capacity of all of us. It is up to us to strengthen this collective capacity, enabling the most adventurous among us to continue the exploration of what lies beyond our present knowledge, reweaving it with the past and using it to shape the future.

References:

European Research Council Website:

http://erc.europa.eu/pdf/ERC_Guide_for_Applicants.pdf

Lamont, Michèle (2009) *“How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment”* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Merton, Robert, K. (1957) *“The Reward System of Science”*, in: *On Social Structure and Science*. Ed. By Piotr Sztompka. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 286-304.

Nowotny, Helga (2009) *“Interdisciplinarity and frontier research”* in: *research*eu focus*, “European Research Council. Bringing great ideas to life. No 3, April 2009, 25

Nowotny, Helga (2009) *“Contemporary encounters between the natural and the social sciences: epistemological issues in the fourth domain”* to be published in the *Annals of the International Institute of Sociology*