

# Items

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## The Research Ethic and the Spirit of Internationalism

by Arjun Appadurai\*

### Researching research

In much recent discussion about the internationalization of research, the problem term is taken to be "internationalization." The following remarks suggest that we focus first on research, before we worry about its global portability, its funding, and training people to do it better. These comments expand upon some remarks made by the author at a recent meeting organized by the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies to plan a new phase in the organization of international "research" collaborations. The questions I wish to raise here are: What do we mean when we speak today of research? Is the research ethic, whatever it may be, essentially the same thing in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities? By whatever definition, is there a sufficiently clear understanding of the research ethic in the academic world of North America and Western Europe to justify its central role in current discussions of the internationalization of academic practices?

Such a deliberately naive, anthropological reflection upon the idea of research is difficult. Like other

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cultural keywords, it is so much part of the ground on which we stand and the air we breathe that it resists conscious scrutiny. In the case of the idea of research, there are two additional problems. One, research is virtually synonymous with our sense of what it means to be scholars and members of the academy, and thus it has the invisibility of the obvious. Second, since research is the optic through which we typically find out about something as scholars today, it is especially hard to use research to understand research.

Partly because of this ubiquitous, taken-for-granted and axiomatic quality of research, it may be useful to look at it not historically, as we might be inclined to do, but anthropologically, as a strange and wonderful practice which transformed Western intellectual life perhaps more completely than any other single procedural idea since the Renaissance. What are the cultural presumptions of this idea and thus of its ethic?

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What does it seem to assume and imply? What special demands does it make upon those who buy into it? A systematic answer to this question may well emerge by looking again at the scholarship that we do possess on the history of various disciplines, on national histories of empiricism, on the trajectories through which laboratory research emerged in the middle of the 19th century in various European countries, and on the ways in which various empirical inquiries (from the study of blood circulation and optics through the emergence of philology and musicology) gradually emerged out of the earlier sense of empirical inquiry as a natural component of metaphysical, moral, and poetic inquiries (e.g., Kant on astronomy, Goethe on color, and the like).

We also have a substantial literature on the history of the modern Western research university which contains many clues to the great transformation through which research became the defining characteristic of all reliable knowledge. Today, every branch of the university system in the West, but also many branches of government, law, medicine, journalism, marketing, and even the writing of some kinds of fiction and the work of the armed forces do not command serious public attention or funds before they demonstrate their foundation in research. To write the history of this huge transformation of our fundamental protocols about the production of reliable new knowledge is a massive undertaking, better suited to another occasion. For now, let us ask simply what this transformation in our understanding of new knowledge seems to assume and imply.

### What is new knowledge?

Consider a naive definition. Research may be defined as the systematic pursuit of the not-yet-known. Every speech by a university president usually refers to the centrality of the production of new knowledge for the mission of the university. It is usually taken for granted that the machine that produces new knowledge is research. But research itself is rarely discussed in these pronouncements, except to note grants, prizes, and discoveries. One thing is unquestioned: research, as a Western cultural practice, is intended to produce new knowledge.

But the research ethic is obviously not about just any kind of new knowledge. It is about new knowledge that meets certain criteria. It has to plausibly

emerge from some reasonably clear grasp of relevant prior knowledge. The question of whether someone has produced new knowledge, in this sense, requires a community of assessment, usually pre-existent, vocational and specialized. This community is held to be competent to assess not just whether a piece of knowledge is actually new but whether its producer has complied with the protocols of pedigree: the review of the literature, the strategic citation, the delineation of the appropriate universe—neither shapelessly large nor myopically small—of prior, usually disciplinary knowledge. In addition, legitimate new knowledge has to somehow strike its primary audience as interesting. That is, it has to strike them not only as adding something recognizably new to some pre-defined stock of knowledge but, ideally, as adding something interesting. Of course, boring new knowledge is widely acknowledged to be a legitimate product of research, but the search for the new-and-interesting is always present in professional systems of assessment.

Reliable new knowledge, in this dispensation, cannot come *directly* out of intuition, revelation, rumor, or mimicry. It has to be a product of some sort of systematic procedure. This is the nub of the strangeness of the research ethic. In the history of many world traditions (including the Western one) of reflection, speculation, argumentation, and ratiocination, there has always been a place for new ideas. In several world traditions (although this is a matter of continuing debate) there has always been a place for discovery, and even for discovery grounded in empirical observations of the world. Even in those classical traditions of intellectual work, such as those of ancient India, where there is some question about whether empirical observation of the natural world was much valued, it is recognized that a high value was placed on careful observation and recording of human activity. Thus, the great grammatical works of Panini (the father of Sanskrit grammar) are filled with observations about good and bad usage which are clearly drawn from the empirical life of speech communities. Still, it would be odd to say that Panini was conducting research on Sanskrit grammar, anymore than that Augustine was conducting research on the workings of the will, or Plato on tyranny, or even Aristotle on biological structures or of politics. Yet these great thinkers certainly changed the way their

readers thought, and their works continue to change the way we think about these important issues. They certainly produced new knowledge and they were even systematic in the way they did it. What makes it seem anachronistic to call them researchers?

### Research and moral voice

The answer lies partly in the link between new knowledge, systematicity, and an organized professional community of criticism. What these great thinkers did not do was to produce new knowledge *in relation to* a prior citational world and an imagined world of *specialized* professional readers and researchers. But there is another important difference. The great thinkers, observers, discoverers, inventors, and innovators of the pre-research era invariably had moral, religious, political, or social projects and their exercises in the production of new knowledge were therefore, by definition, virtuoso exercises. Their protocols could not be replicated, not only for technical reasons but because their questions and frameworks were shot through with their political projects and their moral signatures. Once the age of research (and its specific modern ethic) arrives, these thinkers become necessarily confined to the proto-history of the main disciplines which now claim them, or to the footnotes of the histories of the fields into which they are seen as having trespassed. But in no case are they seen as part of the history of research, as such. This is another angle on the growth of specialized fields of inquiry in the modern research university in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.

These considerations bring us close to the core of the modern research ethic, to something which underpins the concern with systematicity, prior citational contexts, and specialized modes of inquiry. This is the issue of replicability, or, in the aphoristic comment of my colleague George Stocking, the fact that what is involved here is not search but *re-search*. There is of course a large technical literature in the history and philosophy of science about verifiability, replicability, falsifiability and the transparency of research protocols. All of these criteria are intended to eliminate the virtuoso technique, the random flash, the generalist's epiphany, and other private sources of confidence. All confidence in this more restricted ethic of new knowledge reposes (at least in principle) in the idea that results can be repeated, sources can

be checked, citations verified, and calculations confirmed by one or many other researchers. Given the vested interest in showing their peers wrong, these other researchers are a sure check against bad protocols or lazy inferences. The fact that such direct cross-checking is relatively rare in the social sciences and the humanities is testimony to the abstract moral sanctions associated with the idea of replicability.

This norm of replicability gives hidden moral force to the idea, famously associated with Max Weber, of the importance of value-free research, especially in the social sciences. Once the norm of value-free research successfully moves from the natural sciences into the social and human sciences (no earlier than the late 19th century), we have a sharp line not just between such "ancients" as Aristotle, Plato, and Augustine, on the one hand and modern researchers on the other, but also a line between Goethe, Kant, Locke, and other "moderns" whom we would still feel uncomfortable designating as researchers. The importance of value-free research in the modern research ethic assumes its full force with the subtraction of the idea of moral voice or vision and the addition of the idea of replicability. It is not difficult to see the link of these developments to the steady secularization of academic life after the 17th century. Given these characteristics, it follows that there can be no such thing as individual research, in the strict sense, in the modern research ethic, though of course individuals may and do conduct research. Research in the modern, Western sense, is through and through a collective activity, in which new knowledge emerges from a professionally defined field of prior knowledge and is directed towards evaluation by a specialized, usually technical, body of readers and judges, who are the first sieve through which any claim to new knowledge must ideally pass. This fact has important implications for the work of "public" intellectuals, especially outside the West, who routinely address non-professional publics. I will address this question below. Being first and last defined by specific communities of reference (both prior and prospective), new knowledge in the modern research ethic has one other crucial characteristic that has rarely been explicitly discussed and is addressed next.

### The shelf life of new ideas

Research knowledge—in its modern Western ideal-

type—has a peculiar shelf life. It is new knowledge intended to have an ideal life-history, in which it is assessed in regard to whether it is well constructed, replicable, systematic, and even interesting in the first phase. In its second phase, research knowledge is cited, used, criticized and otherwise socially processed through the relevant organizations of journals, books, conferences, and classrooms. In its terminal phase, it either disappears because replication shows its weaknesses (a respectable form of extinction), or it is fully absorbed into the world of necessary specialist footnotes (thus joining the respectable family of emeritus ideas) or, in the most exceptional cases, it joins the small group of great ideas that will enter public life and remain forever hallowed, whatever their fate in the history of “normal” science: Marx on class struggle, Darwin on natural selection, Freud on dreams, are examples of this latter and very rare sort of once-new knowledge.

For most researchers, the trick is how to choose theories, define frameworks, ask questions and design methods that are most likely to produce research with a plausible shelf life. Too grand a framework or too large a set of questions and the research is likely not be funded, much less to produce the ideal shelf life. Too myopic a framework, too detailed a set of questions, and the research is likely to be dismissed by funders as trivial, and even when it is funded, to sink without a bubble in the ocean of professional citations. The most elusive characteristic of the research ethos is this peculiar shelf life of any piece of reliable new knowledge. How is it to be produced? More important, how can we produce institutions that can produce this sort of new knowledge predictably, even routinely? How do you train scholars in developing this faculty for the lifelong production of pieces of new knowledge which function briskly but not for too long? Can such training be internationalized?

I have already suggested that there are few walks of modern life, both in the West and in some other advanced industrial societies, in which research is not a more or less explicit requirement of plausible policy or credible argumentation, whether the matter is child abuse or global warming, punctuated equilibrium or consumer debt, lung cancer or affirmative action. Research-produced knowledge is everywhere, doing battle with other kinds of knowledge (produced by personal testimony, opinion, revelation, or rumor) and

with other pieces of research-produced knowledge. Our children think they are learning to do research ever earlier, in middle school and high school: usually this means some low-level mimicry of adult academic practices involving note cards, encyclopedias, guides to footnote style, and rules of pagination. Many of us teach undergraduates whose idea of research involves just this sort of sympathetic magic: get the protocols right and presto! you are doing research.

Thus two related dilemmas of the liberal arts college and the research university in the United States are: what is the proper relationship between teaching and research (for faculty)? And is there a connection between learning to think critically and learning to do research (for undergraduates)? Absent a critical sense of what the research ethic is, these questions tend to be resolved mechanically and without enthusiasm both by teachers and by students. The reasons for this lack of enthusiasm lie in part in the reduced contact between faculty and student cultures in liberal arts settings, which in turn has many sources, including the growing gap between generational cultures in the United States. But there is a deeper problem. The sense of discipline associated with liberal learning, critical thinking, and citizenship is part of an ethic of self-cultivation and cosmopolitanism that lies at the heart of liberal social thought. But the sense of discipline associated with research has little to do with the creation of cultivated, cosmopolitan citizens and much to do with the techniques and protocols for training specialists and producing disciplinary knowledge. The gap between these two senses of “discipline” remains largely unrecognized and, as a result, unbridged.

Though there are numerous debates and differences about research style, among natural scientists, policymakers, social scientists, and humanists, there is also a discernible area of consensus. This consensus is built around the view that the most serious problems are not those to be found at the level of theories or models but those involving method: data-gathering, sampling bias, reliability of large numerical data-sets, comparability of categories across national data archives, survey design, problems of testimony and recall, and the like. To some extent, this emphasis on method is a reaction to widespread unease about the multiplication of theoretical paradigms and normative visions, especially in the social

sciences. Furthermore, in this perspective, method, translated into research design, is taken to be a reliable machine for producing ideas with the appropriate shelf life. This implicit consensus and the differences it seeks to manage take on special importance for any effort to internationalize social science research.

### Area studies and internationalization

A large and vital area of shared concern between social scientists and humanists is area studies, which emerged in the 1940s in substantial part through the interest of the major foundations and the Social Science Research Council, as a field virtually defined by its need for amalgamating different styles of research. For the last five decades, social scientists and humanists have wrestled over the proper balance between cultural specificity and the need for comparison, between intense language study and a more tactical approach to problems of language and translation and between the requirements of full fidelity to local sources and primary loyalty to the needs for comparison and generalization.

This is hardly the place for a full discussion of these issues, which have caused a fresh burst of anxiety among funders and scholars in the United States and have received fairly wide airing in recent years. For the present context, what is important is that the debates over area studies have not included a critical reflection on the broad cultural assumptions behind the modern research ethic itself. Such a critical reflection might move us beyond method to matters of research style, research priorities, and research cultures, conceived in the broadest way.

Such deliberation is a vital prerequisite for internationalizing social science research, especially when the objects of research themselves have acquired international, transnational, or global dimensions of vital interest to the social sciences. In the perspective sketched out in this essay, we might ask ourselves what it means to internationalize a research ethic which itself has a rather unusual set of cultural diacritics. This ethic assumes a commitment to the routinized production of certain kinds of new knowledge, a special sense of the systematics for the production of such knowledge, a quite particular idea of the shelf life of good research results, a definite sense of the specialized community of experts who

precede and follow any specific piece of research, and a distinct positive valuation of the need to detach morality and political interest from scholarly research.

Such a deparochialization of the research ethic—of the idea of research itself—will require asking the following sorts of questions. Is there a principled way to close the gap between many U.S. social scientists, who are suspicious of any form of applied or policy-driven research and social scientists from many other parts of the world who see themselves as profoundly involved in the social transformations sweeping their own societies? Can we retain the methodological rigor of modern social science while restoring some of the prestige and energy of earlier visions of scholarship, in which moral and political concerns were central? Can we find ways to legitimately engage scholarship by public intellectuals here and overseas whose work is not primarily conditioned by professional criteria of criticism and dissemination? What are the implications of the growing gap, in many societies, between institutions for technical training in the social sciences and broader traditions of social criticism and debate? Are we prepared to move beyond a model for internationalizing social science whose main concern is with improving how others practice our precepts? Is there something for us to learn from colleagues in other national and cultural settings whose work is not characterized by a sharp line between social scientific and humanistic styles of inquiry? Asking such questions with an open mind is not just a matter of ecumenism or goodwill. It is a way of enriching the answers to questions which increasingly affect the relationship between social science research and its various constituencies here in the United States as well.

If we are serious about building a genuinely international and democratic community of researchers—especially on matters that involve cross-cultural variation and inter-societal comparison—then we have two choices. One is to take the elements that constitute the hidden armature of our research ethic as given and unquestionable, and proceed to look around for those who wish to join us. This is what may be called *weak* internationalization. The other is to imagine and invite a conversation about research in which, by asking the sorts of questions I have just described, the very elements of this ethic could be subjects of debate, and to which scholars from other

societies and traditions of inquiry could bring their own ideas about what counts as new knowledge and about what communities of judgment and accountability they might judge to be central in the pursuit of such knowledge. This latter option—which might be called *strong* internationalization—might be more laborious, even contentious. But it is the surer way to create communities and conventions of research in which membership does not require unquestioned prior adherence to a quite specific research ethic. In the end, the elements that I have identified as belonging to our research ethic may well emerge from this

dialogue all the more robust for having been exposed to a critical internationalism. In this sense, American social science has nothing to fear and much to gain from principled internationalization. ■

#### **Letters to the Editor**

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