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THE RESEARCH DILEMMA:
To Lead or to Follow
Alec Erwin

It seems to me that researchers and intellectuals in general continually oscillate between two powerful imperatives - one when research is able to lead events or one when it follows events in the sense of responding to research requests. Of course, in the academic world this crisp definition of a problem could be the subject of numerous seminars - both definitional and substantive. However, in my experience there is little doubt that this tension permeates any discussion on how intellectuals conduct themselves in relation to the wider society.

In a situation of transition such as that we now face, this tension will intensify. In South Africa the racial composition of the intellectual and research community remains too white, as does its gender composition remain too male. These two factors plus the highly politicised society we are in, will push these communities toward division, doubt and an uncomfortable self-consciousness in action. If this assessment is correct then it presents certain dangers and challenges.

I would argue that it is in fact impossible for the intellectual and research community to be leaders of society in their own right. They can only play a leading role in favourable political and economic circumstances. It is very much easier to become a follower of political and economic events and to wait to be asked to do research. But to be a mere servant of political and economic organisations is to devalue the notion of intellect and to destroy the efficacy of research - lessons clearly apparent from apartheid South Africa, fascist capitalist states and authoritarian socialist states.

This poses a fine balance. On the one hand research can flourish in a favourable political (i.e. open and democratic society) and economic (i.e. resources are available) situation. This suggests that researchers and intellectuals should be active participants in striving for such a favourable situation. However, on the other hand, does this not mean that the researchers could become the instruments of particular political and economic interests in the process of transition? There is little doubt that such a dilemma exists acutely for many here tonight. Yet if the intellectual and research community can achieve a fine balance between these poles then the benefits to all aspects of society are very, very considerable, if often immeasurable.

South Africa in this transition phase needs every benefit it can get, so that a positive leading role for the research and intellectual community should be a priority goal. These communities will have to be active in achieving this goal; they cannot be passive by-standers. This of course immediately raises the dilemma mentioned above.

I know that there is a view - quite a common one - that the role of the intellectual - academic or researcher - is to be objective and stand above the currents of politics...
and economics. The universities are seen as the citadels of such objectivity. It seems to me that this is a naive viewpoint leading to inaction. This is a dangerous inaction because the very positive content of objectivity that should reside in universities can be destroyed by political and economic forces that are far from inactive.

We need to seek more complex answers. Here I wish to outline very briefly some of the factors that I believe we must confront in South Africa at present. I want to concentrate now on research rather than broader intellectual activity. In the politically charged environment we live in, is it possible to be a good researcher and politically committed? I would argue that the answer is ‘yes’, provided that the researcher is cognisant of the difficulties that have to be addressed.

It is more difficult to separate the research agenda from political commitment or inclination than it is to separate the research method from political commitment. A completely free hand in a research agenda is a very rare luxury because at the very least the necessary resources for research are released by political - in the broad sense - decisions. In general an institution wants research done because it wishes to make some use of the results.

If the research method is going to be good and the results, therefore, of some worth, a particular relationship has to be established. I would refer to this as an ‘arms length relationship’. This implies a distinction between the process of formulating policy and that of doing research. I would argue that this relationship is healthy and arms length if the researcher not only attempts to answer questions within the problematic of the policy maker but is also able to question the problematic in order to reach the best results. It is this ability to interrogate plus the usual criteria of good research that makes it essential to separate political and policy commitments from research method.

Forgive me for setting out what are basic points. However, if these are basic points then it is not only the general environment that allows for good research but also the moral courage of researchers in following these practices. We have made many mistakes in the past and we must not make them in the future. Being politically committed and a good researcher requires a conscious process - a process that must be continually renewed. We need to fight for such an ethos both in the research community and in the institutions that will use research for policy or product development purposes.

The relationship between research and user institutions is a complex one. It is necessary to see this relationship in a wider context of a research complex that requires asking questions about breadth, length and depth. The breadth refers to the range of subjects that are being taught - from advanced theory to practical occupational skills. The length refers to the nature of the research - is it ‘blue sky’ basic research at one end or in-house company/union research at the other end of the spectrum? The depth refers to the available resources, both intellectual and physical. The former relates to the quality and emphasis of the basic education system and the latter to the institutional arrangements that will facilitate and resource the research.

These dimensions intersect in a way which overall constitutes the research complex in a particular country. The parts are largely interdependent but are not all of equal
weight in any particular society. I have tried to represent this in a crude diagrammatic form.

You will detect in this diagram an emphasis - possibly an overemphasis - on science, technology and vocational skills. This is not to eschew or ignore research in the humanities. Rather I have two intentions. Firstly, to locate such research in a wider context and, secondly, to correct what I feel to be a preoccupation with research in the humanities.

The diagram tries to put together somewhat simplistically the contributing factors to the research complex. From this it can be seen that in terms of human and physical resources it is easier for a country in South Africa's position to concentrate in the South East Quadrant. In fact very few countries can develop the full complex outlined. On the outer edges of the North West Quadrant, international co-operation is always essential. It could be argued from this therefore that a country should concentrate on the areas where its resources allow it to be effective. Implicit in some of the arguments in South Africa about the need to be relevant is a view that the South East Quadrant, being more immediately related to products and social needs,
is where we should concentrate. Without denying the importance of our immediate needs, I want to argue that this is a dangerous path to follow. Whilst it is true that we do not have the resources to undertake all areas of research, that does not mean that we should abandon the need to seek a balance. There are three main factors that will be crucial in defining this balance.

Firstly, as we move to the outer edges of this South East Quadrant we move towards products (both physical and policy). This has two effects. It heightens the tension discussed earlier and pulls the research closer to being servile to particular political and economic institutions. Contract type research dominates and inevitably he who pays the piper calls the tune. This issue based research has a corrosive effect on the quality of research in general.

The second effect is to reduce the capacity for product innovation because the technology base that underlies these products lies with the core of the complex occupied by research of a less applied kind. In the South African context this will make us even more dependent on foreign technology and product development. This is not an argument against market influenced research. It is an argument against maintaining only market driven research.

This leads to the second key area and that is the significant change in the world systems of production and consumption. These processes in the advanced industrial countries are now heavily based on advanced technology and rapid changes in production processes. This is leading to changes in work organisation requiring a more skilled workforce that has a capacity for continual and rapid retraining. This capacity requires not just job specific skills but an understanding of the technology behind the jobs and equipment being introduced.

There are two important implications of this. The first is that installing and using new technology requires an understanding of it and the second is that training a skilled workforce requires trainers who understand what is happening technologically and theoretically.

If we allow the North West Quadrant to stagnate and contract, our position in relation to the world becomes uncertain. We will either be incapable of adopting new technology effectively, thus falling further and further behind and creating ever greater price, productivity and product differentials in relation to world markets. Or we will become entirely dependent on imported skills - a costly and unsustainable possibility. The long run costs of being caught in either or both these positions are very high.

This dilemma allows a more careful understanding of what we should seek to achieve in the North West Quadrant. Whilst we cannot allocate the resources necessary to develop the research and development base for the whole range of new technologies, we should allocate resources to ensure we can understand what is happening. This will require both effective secondary research and teaching processes, but it can also be enhanced by seeking to participate in international co-operation wherever and whenever possible.

However, I believe even more can be done in the North West Quadrant if we develop a particular growth path in South Africa (and Southern Africa) and its
associated technology strategy. This raises the third key area: pressure from the socio-economic momentum of society. I would argue that we have to integrate the new technologies of the advanced industrial countries into the products demanded by a growth path that addresses poverty, unemployment and a lack of infrastructure in Southern Africa.

It is out of these products that we will have to look to develop a manufactured export market - not to Europe, USA or Japan but to the giant developing economies of the South. In this way we become technological ‘converters’ of new technology to meet our specific product needs (by products I mean both physical and policy). By meeting our product needs we will then seek to export them to compatible economies. Exports to the advanced economies will only be on the basis of small niche markets. This still will provide an expanding and vital basis for research within the North West Quadrant. It also allows us to identify the right balance within the research complex and make other important adjustments. Two important consequences are the need to provide adequate base education and the need to create an institutional framework to undertake research within this ‘technological core’.

What I have tried to argue and I hope link together is the following thread: the intellectual and research community is inevitably caught in a tension between attempting to lead social events or of following these events. Whilst it is probably not possible to lead events, these communities can play a crucial role if they can help to establish the fine balance between being instruments of change used by political and economic forces and that of being servile to existing political and economic interests.

This poses the question as to whether there can be a good researcher who is politically committed. I argued that the answer is ‘yes’, provided that certain protective procedures are continuously applied. However, whilst essential, these cautionary procedures are not enough. We have to seek more complex answers. To do this I attempted to identify the forces at work by defining a research complex with a ‘breadth’, ‘length’ and ‘depth’.

Basically I argued that there is a real danger that in South Africa we will move too heavily toward the South East Quadrant. As indicated, I presented a number of factors impelling us in this direction: the tentative and self-conscious attitudes of the research community, the danger of seeking refuge in objectivity, the tendency to see relevance in the South East Quadrant, the inadequate resource base both financially and in human terms for research and our apparent insignificance in international terms in the endeavours of the North West Quadrant.

I have tried to argue that such an imbalance in the research complex would be bad for research and even worse for the longer term socio-economic development of South Africa within a continuously changing world context.

If the argument is correct then it poses a number of challenges. The key factors in these challenges are not only the political and economic institutions that are the users of research results. As important are the critical linchpin institutions that traverse both base research and the ‘technological core’ as defined in the diagram. These are basically the universities (and their research institutes), advanced technical colleges
and publicly funded research institutes.

In the current environment in South Africa there is a great emphasis on cost effectiveness and market forces, thus increasingly seeing contract research as the answer. This is a mistake and a misunderstanding of the role that market forces can play in R & D. The market is product and policy orientated and therefore issue orientated. Because it is pre-occupied with cost effectiveness and defined pay-back periods, it will drastically underfund base research and the areas within the ‘technological core’. This corrodes research capacity.

Key institutions are under two sources of pressure at present. The one is the pressure toward the market outlined above. The other (one with its own complications that I don’t have the time to address), is the pressure for greater participation in both higher education and research projects from communities. This is healthy and other speakers in this symposium will speak on some of its challenges. However, an unintended consequence of this pressure can also be to move us to the South East.

The real challenge, therefore, facing these institutions - and they are critical to all other research - is to define a new set of practices that will define the overall ‘balance’ of the research complex and their role within it. If such a balance is attained, then the role of the market becomes important as an influence on research. This is by no means an easy task but in my opinion not enough is being done about it. We are pre-occupied with market forces, participation and student numbers. We have to emerge soon with a more complex and layered answer. Then researchers and their institutions will have to enter the fray and fight for that answer.

This allows me to conclude where I started which is whether researchers lead social events or follow them. The answer is perhaps best illustrated by an uncomfortable image. Researchers (and their institutions) are destined to sit uncomfortably on a barbed wire fence between leading and following. I’m not advocating that you step off and locate more comfortably. If you want to be good researchers, you can’t do that. I regret to say that a leading role - something I feel you must play - consists of moving the fence forward toward the light and away from the dark. You’ll need tough skins in the right places. Good luck. You’ll need it!

DISCUSSION

HAROLD WOLPE: I’m not very clear on what you mean by leading events in their own forum. I know obviously there’s the whole debate about researchers making policy or attempting to make the policy or simply confirming, perhaps in criticising those policies.

ALEC ERWIN: What I would define as leading in their own right would be a situation where we assess and conduct the research; we assess what the present situation is; we assess what the resources are; we do endless comparison studies; and if we come up with this it will meet all our needs and that gets implemented. That is the ideal situation where the researchers lead. They are offering a solution to
your problem, and you apply the solution and you move forward.

I think that capacity, where the rational processes, detailed scholarly process of research, become the actual policy, is not possible. That’s what I define by ‘leading.’ Equally, by ‘following’ I mean that the researcher sits and waits. He says, ‘I can’t move on education until the ANC asks me a question.’ Or ‘I can’t move on the economy until the Chamber of Mines asks me a question.’

It seems to me the researcher, or the research community, is always caught. They can’t just sit and wait for someone to ask them to do something. Equally, when they do, it is unlikely that it will be fully implemented. It’s an interactive process. And what gets implemented and what doesn’t get implemented depends far more heavily on the political and economic circumstances of that period -- and that’s the dilemma which I was posing -- in which the research community needs to play a role in some other way.

One of the dangers is that the universities plus the attendant research community don’t really have a very clear vision of what they should be doing in the society because they are focusing too heavily on the immediate problems of costs, resources which they can’t avoid.

There is a fairly substantial problem in South Africa’s mechanism for funding research. We’re starving institutions of resources, starving funding for researching, forcing the institutions more and more into the market, to issue-based things.

FRANCIE LUND: We need to also find out who funds visions any more.

ALEC ERWIN: The most successful companies in the world all fund visions. That’s why they’re successful.

RENE LOEWENSON: What is the role of the producer, the worker, those at the production site, in that process of innovation?

ALEC ERWIN: The particular priority we’ve chosen is a new training system which allows people to participate in the production processes by giving them greater information and technology. What we’ve done is to set up research and development groupings, consisting of worker leaders, and try to give an adult education that will allow them to formulate proposals. We’re attempting to create a capacity within our own ranks of actively inserting ourselves as actors in this change in technology.

MALE VOICE: It seems to me that there is a set of social forces bent on transforming the South African society. How would you reconcile the need of these social forces to implant a research capacity for transformation, and the transitional role you seem to have assigned to the researcher?

ALEC ERWIN: It would seem to me that there are two areas that are important. One is for researchers themselves to attempt to create an ethos that gives them this arms-length relationship, and fight for that ethos. The other, I think, is the broader political and economic process, which is taking place in South Africa: the debate about what sort of socio-economic society we want; what kind of growth do we want; what social institutions we want; what do we mean by democracy and how does participation take place. The debate about civics, unions and communities being involved. The balance of power between state and civil society; the balance of power between researchers and the institutions using them.
MIKE MORRIS: One of the ways of staying on a barbed wire fence is to hold hands with someone else who's also on the fence with you. We have examples of ways of doing that, which is a process whereby some of the socially and politically committed intellectuals in the universities have got together in a grouping which has linked itself at arms length with COSATU, but in that way tries to deal with the problem of individuals sitting on the fence and falling off or tearing themselves to pieces.

EDDIE WEBSTER: I enjoyed very much what you had to say, especially the part about sitting on the fence, having got cut many times over the years. It's a sensitive spot. I can identify with you. I just want to make one observation, and that is about your idea of the university as a linchpin for research. It seems to me that we in South Africa have systematically downplayed the research component of the university and turned them largely into teaching universities, including the established universities like my own university of Wits, where it's not possible to be a permanent member of staff and be a full time researcher. The observation I just wanted to make is in fact our universities haven't played that kind of linchpin role.

ALEC ERWIN: I think that universities are a linchpin. But why they must be the linchpin seems to me in the present situation in South Africa is that they are very heavy concentrations of intellectuals and resources. And they must use that concentration. If they are not capable of defending any interests, or articulating any interests, which I think is even worse, then I think we've got problems.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI: The accent which doesn't seem to be there is the accent on transformation, because in a situation where the market itself cannot be reflective of the long-term needs of the society, the only other factor you seem to put besides the market is the researcher himself, the point of view of the researcher and the moral courage of the researcher. The question I have is, what do you see as the role of other non-economic factors: the role of politics, the role of all those sectors of society who cannot express themselves through the market?

ALEC ERWIN: I think people in institutions like unions, business or political organisations are going to have very instrumental views on what they want done. The balance against that will have to come from the research and intellectual communities themselves. I don't think you can expect the non-instrumental approach to emerge from the organisations that want things done. If I gave the impression that the only counterpose to the market is research, I just want to correct that quickly. It's probably a fairly minor one. More important is the notion of what the research complex looks like. That is not something to be solved by researchers alone. That is something that is going to be solved by a political process in which economic actors, both unions, civics and business, (and rural organisations as they emerge) will play an important role. I was really posing the dilemma of what role the research community can play within that process, without becoming merely a servant of particular actors in that process, of having some distance from them.