

NEW EUROPEAN DYNAMICS IN PROMOTING SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

Panel discussion at the German Embassy, Washington DC, May 2, 2007. Jointly organized by the German Embassy, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and the GHI. Participants: Ernst Ludwig Winnacker (Secretary General, European Research Council), Michael McDonald (Assistant Chairman for Programs, National Endowment for the Humanities), Arden L. Bement, Jr. (Director, National Science Foundation). Moderator: Norman Birnbaum (Georgetown University).

On May 2, 2007, the GHI, the German Embassy, and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft organized a panel discussion on the newly founded European Research Council (ERC). With representatives from the ERC and its American corollaries, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation, along with several scholars, the panel focused on the establishment of the European Research Council as a new pan-European instrument for funding scholarly research in both the sciences and the humanities. With this view of the ERC forming the background for the ensuing discussion on research policy in the European Union and the United States, the panel sought to identify not only the internal consequences and issues of a shift toward a Europeanized research policy but also the international dimensions and implications of this new entity for funding research.

The discussion began by addressing the internal European implications of the ERC. This included an in-depth appraisal of the new role and function of the ERC, as well as a critical assessment of its nature vis-à-vis older nation-centered research foundations. Seeking to identify potential changes or new developments in the funding of European scholarly research, the panel discussed what the ERC offers to the various disciplines in the sciences and humanities and, furthermore, whether and how the ERC represents a new direction in funding research, and if so, what the new message and objectives are. One of the points critically discussed here was the ERC's increased emphasis on fostering research networks. This new focus on research networks, while encouraging international and varied research, can also subvert and divert research projects by forcing them into partnerships whose only utility is to more easily obtain funding.

Institutionally, the panel considered the structure and design of the ERC itself and what effects these could have on its work and on scholarly research in general. This included a comparison to existing national models, mainly the United States and Germany. While the German equivalent, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, integrates both the sciences and the humanities into a single funding agency, the American counterpart actually separates the sciences and the humanities into two chief complementary agencies (NEH and NSF). As the ERC is based loosely on the German example, the panel considered the use of integrating the sciences and humanities under the umbrella of one funding organization. Conversely, the implications of separating the two branches were addressed by looking at the American model. More generally, a specific understanding of how the structure of a research foundation influences the production of knowledge at various levels was sought. Moreover, the panel analyzed which system lends itself more easily to encouraging interdisciplinary projects and innovative research.

The issue of the conjoining of the funding for the humanities and the sciences in the ERC was problematized through the questioning of the concept of “frontier” research, which, while perhaps useful in the sciences, is less significant for the humanities, where this so-called “frontier” is either not applicable or difficult to locate. Moreover, panelists questioned how the council would understand the concept of “frontier”: Will it understand it as fashionable trends or serious research? By extension, will a focus on “frontier” research encourage scholars to set themselves apart from the conventional, and if so, how will unusual ideas and risk-taking be reviewed and valued? As a point of comparison, Michael McDonald (NEH) noted that the NEH has a discretionary fund (20 percent of its funding) that is reserved for funding projects that have a high risk of failing. While it remains to be seen how the ERC itself will evaluate and choose projects, it seems essential that some focus be placed in ensuring a varied degree in type as well as “risk” of the projects taken on.

The model of the ERC within Europe, and its goal to establish international peer review and standards in Europe, will most likely serve as a model for future cooperation between international funding organizations. With this in mind, the panel turned toward the international and transatlantic implications. Here, the ERC’s potential interaction with other funding organizations was covered: specifically, how the ERC will compete/cooperate with its US equivalents (e.g., NEH, NEA, NSF) and what consequences it will have for existing internationalization strategies of other funding agencies like the American counterparts. The panel also evaluated how the ERC will affect the transnational flow of scholars. Chiefly considered was the nature of the attraction that the ERC will possess: Will the attraction of the ERC be more institutional (that is, will

it attract cooperation with institutions themselves, such as US universities) or individual (that is, will it attract individual scholars and does it have the potential to reverse the so-called “brain drain” and lure more young US researchers to Europe). With the focus on larger networks, it remains an open question how easily individual scholars could access funding from the ERC.

Questioning whether the ERC will be appropriate as a funding program for tackling the challenges posed to societies in terms of knowledge-creation, innovation, and transfer of knowledge, the panel turned toward a discussion of the future challenges of funding research in Europe. With regard to the humanities, the question was posed whether the ERC would strengthen or weaken its position vis-à-vis scientific research. As noted earlier, a potential problem for the humanities is that research will be measured by the same criteria used for the natural sciences. The central issue of measuring progress in the humanities remains an open question. Michael McDonald provocatively contended that progress is a vacuous concept in the humanities and that innovation is an overrated criterion in its research. In the final discussion, other criticisms were explored largely through a counterfactual perspective. This perspective, discussed by Norman Birnbaum, approached the function and use of the ERC by questioning whether it would have provided funding for past groundbreaking European research had it been in place at the time.

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