

Helmut Krauch's „Priorities for Research Policy“ (1970) revisited

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How can you tell a classic? Perhaps by the fact that the book can only be obtained second-hand. Thus you can find Krauch's "Priorities for Research Policy" of 1970 in the 1971 second edition for 3 Euros, or "cover fair, otherwise good, unread" for 12 Euros, or with a distinct appreciation in value compared to the original list price as an autographed copy" with a dedication by the author to P.P.M." for 22 Euros.

1 The Dean of Systems Research

Helmut Krauch, who was qualified as a lecturer in chemistry and has been described by the University of Kassel, where he held tenure in systems design from 1972, on the occasion of his 75th birthday as a vanguard, "outside the box" thinker in systems analysis, founded the "Study Group for Systems Research" (SfS), one of the forerunners of ITAS, in Heidelberg in 1958. This was a place providing interdisciplinary and even unconventional scientific advice for policy making in such areas as research planning and research policy. In 1966, Krauch together with Werner Kunz, Horst Rittel and others edited a book on behalf of the Rationalisierungs-Kuratorium der Deutschen Wirtschaft e.V. reporting from a "Study on the goals and structures of American research institutes". This had the title "Research Planning" and was published by the Oldenbourg Verlag. "Research planning" was obviously a highly controversial term. Is it possible to plan research? What about the freedom of science and the creativity of researchers? But even the then president of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Julius Speer, wrote in a 1971 document on a DFG colloquium on research planning: "Attitudes to planning have changed significantly for scientific funding since

the last war. Initially, science saw a contradiction between planning and freedom of research. The high material needs of modern research, which were not matched by the amount of funding available... have lent new and greater significance to planning" (Speer 1971, p. 7). At the middle of the 20th century, research was no longer an outgrowth of nature (if it had ever been one), but "organised" (to quote the title of another book by Krauch from 1970 "Organised Research", published by Luchterhand). There was a need to set research priorities for the available, and inevitably inadequate, financial resources.

2 Controversial Research Priorities

We have now arrived at the subject of this book.¹ Krauch first diagnoses that current research priorities (defence, space travel, atom technology) do not coincide with the great societal problems. "The foundations of our social life are by far less well researched than moon dust" (p. 6). But how are other research priorities to be determined and implemented?

Based on a representative survey of the population by the Study Group for Systems Research, Krauch comes to the conclusion that there are distinct differences between the actual priorities of the Federal government for research and technological development in 1969 and the priorities articulated by the population (representative opinion survey). While the top ranks for actually funded research are held by defence, nuclear and space, the population awarded top priority to medicine, nutrition, environmental hygiene (!), teaching and learning and energy. Krauch by no means urges for a "survey-based democracy" (p. 14ff.). The simple expression of an opinion is an insufficient argument for other priorities in research, especially if one considers the unequal state of information and the divergent interests of "lay persons", research administration and science (p. 19f.)

3 Lay persons, Research Administration and Interest Groups

In addition to the survey of the population, an experiment (“Research planning I”) was carried out with students (representing the lay persons) and “specialists” from research administration (the ministry, the German Research Foundation (DFG) etc.). These two groups were first informed about twelve promising future topics for research and then were asked to rate their chances of realisation, their benefits for industry and society and the respondents’ own degree of information and to set priorities. Amazingly, there was little difference between the research priorities of the specialists and the students. Priority was given particularly to those among the twelve research subject areas which implied most strong societal change and which promised the strongest side-effects on other areas, namely teaching and learning, data processing and medicine.

Thus Krauch inevitably arrives at a political science analysis: Why are research priorities set in one way and not in another? It obviously is not due to the opinions of research administration that socially desirable research topics are prevented, but according to Krauch, due to the influence of interest groups, i.e. institutional and structural conditions. The lobby groups are far superior to the ministerial bureaucracy through their specialist knowledge, while the population is unable to provide any counterweight on account of its low degree of organisation, lack of knowledge and handicapped opportunities for articulation of interests (p. 31).

Therefore those proposals for research programmes are successful that

- 1) are able to promise political, societal and economic benefits,
- 2) have at their disposal a high scientific articulation potential,

- 3) can indicate successes by the organisations putting forward the proposal,
- 4) can prove that no strong counter interests can be articulated or that it is possible to defend the proposal against them (p. 32f.).

However, Krauch does not recommend stronger participation of scientists (“democratisation of science”) in the determination of research priorities. Their own interests were in upholding the status quo (p. 36).

4 The “organised conflict” and early applications of Media Technology

In contrast, he develops the “model of organised conflict” (p. 46ff.) which was implemented on a prototype basis at the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk, the largest regional radio/TV network) (p. 47). It combines an expert discourse with lay participation and involves new media technologies (television, databases, telephone voting).

The general information basis is a research database, which is available for the (specialist) public, mass media and interested citizens. Scientists and politicians present their proposals for discussion on television. More detailed information on them can be rapidly accessed from the research database. The judgements and objections of the interested citizens can be entered directly into the process via a “phone in” system. The goal is not to express general opinions, but reasoned and qualified judgements (p. 49). Wherever citizens do not have the opportunity to articulate their interests, scientists would have to express the interests of unorganised minorities. As the generator and articulator of new programmes, the “organised conflict” would have to be sustained over a longer period of time.

In his concluding remarks, Krauch addresses the “costs” of such participatory processes: they do not simplify decision-making, but in the best cases they do improve it. “Public participation in decision making increases tensions, brings conflicts to a head, breaks taboos, costs a great deal of time and makes life more difficult for the decision makers. Truly not exciting prospects. However, it will also unfold a panorama of interests, making it possible to avoid injustice and suffering... The time is ripe, not for more demographic surveys for peoples’ opinions...but an exchange between the executive and the public. This is a dialectic process. Information forms knowledge, knowledge has impact on information through reference to changing conditions by expanding through experience. The thing that returns to the executive, articulated scientifically via the dialectic detour through the reflection of an informed public, corrected by previously unknown facts, has been adapted to the expectations of the public. These in turn, tempered by insight into the scientific and political relationships, have become more concrete, making the transition from mere desirability to justifiable demands” (p. 51).

A classic is also measured by the extent to which the thoughts expressed therein can stand the test of time over years and decades. Krauch’s “Research Priorities” may be regarded as a “blueprint” for today’s so-called third foresight generation. To read this book again after over thirty years is by all means a valuable experience.

Remark

ⁱ The volume also contains the following contributions: Selected problems in the application of decision theory to planning of research and technological development (Krauch and H. Feger); Simulation of societal reality (J.D. Saltzmann); Nutrition in the year 2000 (Krauch) which are not dealt with herein.

Literature

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