The great buzzword of the 1980s was excellence. Through a perversion ascribable to illiteracy and self-interest, a comparative — *excellens* — has been transformed into a superlative and used to confer some *nec plus ultra* status on virtuosity in certain types of activities. This idea of excellence is a modern concept; it was foreign to the Greeks (Dumézil 1987).

The word has been used recently in a flurry of policy initiatives designed to create Centres of Excellence: the federal Secretary of State developed such a program in the early 1980s; Quebec has had a similar program; the same approach was used more recently in Ontario; and a major round of competition for Centres of Excellence was carried out by the federal government in 1989.

There are two separate components in the term “centre of excellence” as used in the current debates. The term “centre” refers to a form of organization of research built on synergies and a crossing of disciplinary bounds; “excellence” is based on a rationale for constructing some centres instead of others, i.e., usually the comparative quality of a group of researchers measured in a particular way. Although I have argued forcefully for the creation of a national network of research centres in the humanities and the social sciences in Canada as a strategy of great promise (Paquet 1987c), one does not necessarily have to argue in the same breath for the funding of “centres of excellence,” especially if excellence is defined in narrow academic disciplinary terms.

This may appear to be an untenable position: how can one disagree with *excellence* as a criterion for selecting among potential candidates in a competition for funding for research centres? Clearly, there is nothing wrong with this

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criterion per se, as long as one realizes that excellence is a weasel word and that behind this label lies a complex scheme for evaluating competing projects—a scheme that may or may not be reasonable depending on what evaluative social system underpins it.

THE MISGUIDED SEARCH FOR ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Human beings have an unlimited capacity for distinguishing and classifying, especially when this serves their interests (Perrenoud 1987). For any strategy of classification corresponds to the fabrication of a hierarchy, and the logics underpinning these ways of classifying are many, often contradictory, and always contentious: it depends fundamentally on what is the norm, the criterion on which the hierarchy is based.

Asking a group to assess excellence is tantamount to authorizing some classification. Any useful debate about choice centres on the legitimacy of the institution charged with the job. On the occasion of recent competitions in Canada, there has been much argument in favour of a classification scheme defined under the agency of the professional academic disciplines. Others have argued that such a classification scheme would produce a hierarchy that is irrelevant to today’s context, that professional academics are the worst possible group for such a job as the professionalization of academe has led to a perversion of its notion of excellence.

A Sociology of the Academic Profession

Katouzian (1980) has provided a vivid sketch of the way in which professionalization has transformed scholars into full-time academic mental workers and has led to the emergence of the professional academic, “a complete layman outside his own discipline and a narrow specialist within it.” These professional academics are members of narrow disciplines; they communicate through specialized journals, and the more integrated the disciplinary profession, the greater the constraint on intellectual activities. The greater the control over the means of publication and propagation of ideas, the less tolerant the official journals are of ideas that threaten established views. Because promotions and academic reputations are linked to publication in these journals, this becomes the overriding objective of the professional academic, which, in turn, dictates academic cautiousness and a high degree of specialization.

As a result of this sort of development, the following pattern has emerged (Katouzian 1980, Paquet 1988a):

- a tendency to concentrate on the solution of “puzzles” instead of attacking substantial problems;
- a proliferation of printed material that adds comparatively little to knowledge;
a research agenda for academic work that is set by fashion and the whims of the "invisible college."

This pointed characterization is not unwarranted. The power of the academic professions has grown to the point where they have become a determining force in the allocation of financial support for research through granting councils and such agencies. Professional academics are the driving force in panels defining the priorities and standards in funding agencies. This explains the high degree of cognitive dissonance of these agencies, even when the public communicates its discontent.

For as soon as the notion of excellence is mentioned, professional academics are quick to point out that they are uniquely equipped to determine what is and is not excellent through the social organization of peer evaluation that they have in place, and through certain measures like citation indexes — the number of times a paper or an author has been quoted or cited in journals regarded as appropriately disciplinary. Indeed, a recent appeal in a competition for the funding of centres of excellence at the federal level has been based, in part, on the unsuitability of a peer reviewer because his citation index was not as robust as the pedigree of some of the people whose projects he was evaluating.

Politics of Confirmation

The social organization of the production of academic knowledge has come to be regarded in certain circles as the only source of meaningful standards by which intellectual worth can be measured. Standardized international criteria like citation indexes and peer review by foreign members of the "invisible college" have become the standard ways to confirm the judgment of the local branch.

The fragility of these approaches has been amply documented (Cole et al. 1981), but this has not weakened the imperium of the dogma in academe. Academics continue to reaffirm that these are the only acceptable and reasonable ways to carry out the classification of research projects, programs, and teams.

The invisible college has thus acquired almost a monopoly on the legitimate gauging of the quality of research and knowledge production, and on the right to argue that only certain types of knowledge meeting its standards should be publicly funded. The classification recognized by the academic community is based on virtuosity in puzzle-solving favoured by certain affiliated journals. These standards may bear little relationship to the substantive questions raised in civil society, as there has been a gradual displacement of content by process in the practice of social sciences and humanities. A certain fixation on methodology has generated a "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" and methodological canons have become the common denominator around which the academic community congregates in lieu of former concern over the fundamental problems of the day.
The process of self-selection hidden behind confirmation by peers is not always transparent, but there have been claims that there is a poor match between the academic classification and what a socioeconomic classification would rank as excellent in competitions for public funding, in the same sense that a scheme using places to explain French wines is irrelevant on the California scene where the kind of grape is the key variable (Douglas 1986).

In the recent past, connoisseurship has developed outside academe, and there have been challenges to the monopoly claimed by academics on granting seals-of-approval to intellectual endeavours (Paquet and von Zur-Muhlen 1989). But academics have continued to use the granting councils as a bulwark in their defense of the perenniality of academic values: the granting councils have been the terrain on which the strategies of dynamic conservatism (selective inattention, containment, least change tactics, etc.) have been most fully deployed (Schon 1971).

Illegitimacy of Delta Knowledge

In classifying, individuals have a certain degree of autonomy, but public classifications derive from communal or social institutions that do the classifying and "the instituted community blocks personal curiosity, organizes public memory, and heroically imposes certainty upon uncertainty. In marking its own boundaries, it affects all lower levels of thinking, so that persons realize their own identities and classify each other through community affiliation" (Douglas 1986). This public production of labels has a significant impact on human beings: it is "making up people," the new labels engender new kinds of people and ensure that they will behave differently (Hacking 1985).

What is left out in academic classification is what academics block out, i.e., what does not fall into the realm of academic disciplines. We have shown elsewhere the extent of the damage done by this reductionism (Paquet 1988e). The tradition originating with René Descartes put the emphasis on a theory-centred style of argument; this has had deleterious effects. There has been a shift from a language of life to general ideas, abstract principles, instrumental reason, and a fixation on methods. This sort of "methodism" has contributed to a reshaping of the notion of interesting knowledge into a new notion of standard output. As a result, work on local, timely, and particular issues has been demoted to the level of uninteresting questions (Toulmin 1988).

The semi-unconscious conspiracy of the academic community against practical knowledge has reached a phase where, in the last half century, an ever narrower range of stylized classes of knowledge has come to be recognized as legitimate by universities. The present social system of production of knowledge has ruled whole categories of useful and usable knowledge — in particular much of what is learned by doing — as mundane, unwholesome, unwanted, illusive, confusing, etc., and discarded it as socially irrelevant (Gilles and Paquet 1989).
We have labeled this “delta knowledge”: a broad category of useful and usable knowledge generated by wroughting and wrighting, by practical philosophy and reflection in action (Schon 1983). This delta world has been rejected by academics, rendered illegitimate, and it has consequently been underfunded. There are important costs to these censures: gaping holes in the knowledge base; and distortions in the process of production of delta knowledge (in management or design for example) forced upon it by the mold in good currency in alpha (humanities), beta (physical sciences), and gamma (social sciences) knowledge production. A further cost is attached to this ideological censure: when the occasion arises for the creation of centres to bolster the production of new knowledge, any academic classification scheme likely to be used by public authorities in search of legitimacy is bound to be blind to excellence if it takes a delta form.

GRANTING COUNCIL AS STALLED OMNIBUS**

Some observers have argued that it is the role of granting councils to serve as brokers and innovators in this context. Because these institutions are in principle mixed public/academic agencies, they should be able to strike the right balance between the academic imperatives of quality and other socio-political criteria. The fact that such institutions have to secure budget allocations from their public-sector masters in a politically competitive context has also been seen as making them particularly sensitive to all the relevant socio-politico-cultural dimensions.

Yet most governments have chosen to set up ad hoc institutions to handle the selection of centres of excellence when they have had the opportunity to do so. Implicitly, it may be argued that governments have decided that one cannot count on granting councils as they now stand to perform this brokerage function effectively. This decision stems undoubtedly in part from an evaluation of the composition and the power structure of such councils, but more

** I did not feel that I had to modify any of the papers published in this book for the analysis would appear to have sustained well the passage of time. I must make an exception for this particular section of this particular paper. Since the paper was written, some ten years ago, there has been a significant effort made by granting councils to shake off the dominium of disciplinarian academics. Through a new brand of leadership, a membership more broadly representative of the meaningful groups of users of research, and the design of innovative joint ventures with the private, public, and civic sectors, the granting councils have been made much more sensitive to society's demands.

Granting councils have also shown signs of being able to correct the biases of academic evaluation and to allow research demands and social needs to be echoed more fully in the allocation of research resources.

But these changes are not yet part of the ethos of granting councils, as has been clearly revealed by some changes in the leadership in some of the granting councils that have generated important volte-faces. Any of the transformations noted above can still be easily reversed. Consequently, one should not underestimate the powers of the Republic of Science and its capacity to re-establish the hegemony of the Republic of Science rules. The idea of the language of needs taking precedence over (or even being considered on a par with) the language of disciplinary worth is still not in good currency.

So my complaints and forebodings may require some sharps and flats, but they are not out of order.
fundamentally from a recognition of the lack of depth of their roots in civil society, of their poor record at gauging the dual constraints of clients' demands and field requirements, and their lack of any mechanism to evaluate priority needs.

**Producers’ Dominance and Lack of Roots in Civil Society**

As they now stand, the granting councils in Canada are institutions that have been all but completely captured by academics. Although academics and nonacademics are appointed by the government, most are chosen from the ranks of professional academics — not so much because of their enlightened view about the place of science in society, but mostly because of some narrow accomplishment in academic disciplines. As for the lay appointees, until recently most were not very knowledgeable in science policy matters, and, consequently, they have been neither vocal nor capable of articulating a coherent philosophy as an alternative to the academic perspective. From time to time, some of the appointees — academic or not — have taken a broader view of the mandate given to granting councils and have been instrumental in triggering some reflection on their social role, but it is fair to say that granting councils have remained largely entrapped by the academic interest groups. This explains why such limited powers and resources have been granted to research councils.

Thus, when governments have felt that they had to address some socio-economic need through an investment in research, they have not found it wise to entrust the decision as to what should be done and by whom to producer-dominated agencies. They felt it wise to set up ad hoc structures. The rationale was that the granting councils did not provide a sufficiently reliable coverage of the diversity of interests in the socioeconomy at large. If granting councils were the classifying institution, major groups of clients and users of research would be disenfranchised and would have little or no opportunity to be heard. The granting councils are neither perceived as capable of acting as surrogates for the forum (Tussman 1977) nor of becoming major players in science policy design.

**Client Demands and Field Requirements**

Even if better representation on granting councils could be achieved, this would still not make them into sufficiently sensitive instruments to ensure monitoring of the changing constraints imposed by the demands of research clients and by the nature of the field requirements. The academic evaluation process is likely to remain their guiding light, for it is unlikely that any consensus on an alternative will develop. Consequently, the logic of the academic evaluation — which puts little value on the research demands of clients and is more than likely to interpret the field constraints in self-serving ways — is bound to remain dominant.
Indeed, the continuous evolution of fields and the changing priorities of clients have led academics to argue that the best research strategy is to allow the producer to proceed independently on the dual assumptions that (1) whatever the researcher might do will turn out to be most helpful in some way and at some time, and that no useful guidance can be expected from uninformed clients; and (2) whatever the researcher chooses to do has a greater chance of being the right thing to do because he/she is best informed about the texture of the field and the optimal path to new knowledge.

Without the inward biases introduced by the disciplinary framework and self-regulation of the field by professional academics, this approach might be defensible as a viable strategy. It would represent a bet on the free flow of competing ideas in the marketplace, generating, through the workings of the invisible hand, the selection of the best research strategies and the generation of the best complement of usable knowledge. However, this bet on the market as the organizing principle is most problematic. First, knowledge as a commodity has a number of characteristics that make it rather special — a public good component, acute uncertainty, etc. — and as a consequence, much waste is generated by simple competitive systems in the world of knowledge production (see Chapter 4). Second, competition is highly imperfect in this knowledge production market cartelized by the "invisible college." The "invisible foot" marches in, and the rent-seeking activities of academics over distributive shares is likely to generate much waste (Brock and Magee 1984).

**No Machinery to Evaluate Needs**

Even with additional sensitivity to clients and sounder evaluation of field requirements, granting councils, within their interpretation of their current mandate, are unlikely to develop a list of research needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. This is not part of their ethos.

The members of granting councils perceive themselves as experts asked to define a technically superior method of adjudication between competing applicants. They perceive their role in a technical mode, not in a political mode. At the core of the problem is a misconception about the political process at work in choosing centres of excellence. Academics do not understand that the issue is not to arrive at a technical optimum, but at a political optimum (Trebilcock et al. 1982). This outcome depends on the interrelated games of politicians, media, bureaucrats, the electorate, and special interest groups — of which academics are but one.

It is unlikely that granting councils as presently constituted can arrive at meaningful answers to national priorities. The cause of this marginalization is that the very idea of a language of needs taking precedence over the language of disciplinary worth is so foreign to granting councils that, were they offered the possibility of managing the whole process of selection of centres of excellence and of identifying national needs, they would probably refuse the job.
USING THE PRINCIPLE OF PRECEDENCE

The decisions made over the last few years about the creation of centres of excellence have reflected a lack of appropriate mechanisms for collective choice. As a result, ad-hocery was instituted as a guiding principle, and the allocation of important sums of money can be defended on the basis of neither academic excellence nor as an echo of socioeconomic priority. We have had the worst of both worlds.

The root cause of this failure has been a false assumption about the whole process: it was assumed that the creation of centres of excellence was a simple technical matter. Expert academics and expert politicians agreed that their standards were different, prepared an ordering and compared their classifications and hierarchies, normalized them over territory and hard disciplines, and tried to arrive at a single ordering. This ordering can in no way be defended as resulting in public expenditures that will ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number. In most cases, the result is the unintended consequence of three intersecting processes: a self-selection of groups attempting to express their preferences in a manner likely to fit into the announced criteria of the competition, an academic classification according to the professional code, and a superficial political adjudication. There is nothing to establish that the groups that came forward are the ones who are best able to contribute to the welfare of the nation, that the groups selected were evaluated with criteria broad enough to ensure that the most urgent national research priorities would be fostered, and that the political authorities would do more than marginal tinkering over the final determination.

As it is likely that there will be other competitions for centres of excellence, one might usefully speculate about alternative ways to do the job.

Needs and Desires

The point of departure is a distinction between needs and preferences. For if the national collectivity, through its governments, wishes to use resources to promote research, can a general principle help define some national classification of priorities on the basis of needs. David Braybrooke and Harry Frankfurt have developed, independently, what they call a "principle of precedence" (Braybrooke and Schotch 1981; Frankfurt 1984b; Braybrooke 1987). This principle suggests that there is widespread acceptance of the precedence of needs over desires. Even John Crosbie — a key minister in the Mulroney government — was quoted in The Financial Post as being in favour of reallocating government resources on the basis of needs rather than wants if cutbacks in government expenditures were necessary (cited in Braybrooke 1987).

Braybrooke and Schotch (1981) have proposed a simple classification that is usable in cost-benefit analysis: first, proposed policies may be subjected to peremptory considerations (rights, honour, standing obligation, respect of life,
etc.); second, policies may be gauged in terms of their impact on *minimum standards of provision for needs*; third, attention might be given to *preferences*. This set of categories subjects public decisions to the principle of precedence; the optimization process is subjected to the constraint of peremptory considerations and of meeting basic needs first: no harm should be done, and this takes precedence over the fulfilling of volitional wants.

In the allocation of public monies to centres of excellence, one might, therefore, start with *projects one cannot do without*, a norm that gets to the needs level and would require that a language of needs be used by the agency in charge of the adjudication process. To the extent that the number and scope of peremptory considerations is kept in check, the list of needs stays manageable, and the minimum standards remain manageably low, this is a viable procedure. However, how can one find a way to articulate these needs and to elicit them?

**A Language of Needs**

A language of needs is necessary to articulate these priorities. Such a language is rooted in what humans need to be human; it is a language that allows us to identify what we are and what we cannot do without if we wish to remain who we are (Ignatieff 1985). In the debate about centres of excellence, it would be useful to start with a classification of what we cannot do without. This might suggest the creation of centres in fields that are strategically important because of the particular circumstances of Canada. For instance, the MacDonald Commission (1985) complained that, even though the Canadian socioeconomy is fundamentally dependent on natural resources and on its relationship with the United States, it had been unable to find the necessary Canadian expertise in those two areas.

To ascertain what we cannot do without, a forum is needed in which individuals and groups can meet and discuss the main threats and challenges to Canadian society today. Such a forum — be it a Council of Social Values or a Committee on the Long Run to be added to the Senate and the House of Commons (Paquet 1968; Braybrooke and Paquet 1987) — would provide the vehicle for arriving at some notion of a list of course-of-life needs, the minimum standards to be maintained, and the elements to be regarded as categorical needs. For the time being, streams of legislation and jurisprudential decisions more or less define the basis for a language of rights. What we need is some thinking about needs to make these categorical need constraints more explicit.

It would be silly to presume that a list of needs and a definition of minimum standards would provide a simple mechanical answer to the question of what research centres should be created; but it would be equally unreasonable to presume that it cannot be done. However, it cannot be done using a top-down procedure. The language of need has to evolve from a multilogue involving all the stakeholders, more or less on the model of any meaningful national consultation carried out to elicit what the priorities of Canadians are. Such a
bottom-up approach was used recently in the case of energy (see Chapter 5) but also in numerous forums on entrepreneurship, on employment, etc.

Social Learning

This approach via a broad participative consultation would require a learning organization (Garratt 1987). It may appear to be somewhat roundabout, but it is not. Creating centres of excellence poses a *wicked* problem to policymakers and policy analysts (see Chapter 2): the goals are either not known or very ambiguous and the means-ends relationships are highly uncertain and poorly understood (Rittel and Webber 1973). Friedmann and Abonyi's (1976) approach is applicable in this context (see Figure 5 and the discussion in Chapter 2).

One way to effect such learning about needs and national priorities is through search conferences (Emery 1982; Williams 1982). Search conferences are designed with the general purpose of engaging participants “in exploring how wider change is affecting them all, developing shared images of a desirable future, examining present resources and constraints with respect to pursuing desired directions, and planning innovative strategies to enhance mutual prospects” (Williams 1982: 179).

There have been interesting experiments in Canada along these lines: the series of national economic conferences organized by the Economic Council of Canada, where stakeholders from all over the country were grouped in sectoral units to prepare the national overall meeting; the various regional summits and the 1989 *Forum pour l'emploi* in Quebec. But there has been very little instituted continuity and, as a result, very little accumulation of knowledge about priorities. Indeed, much of the evolution of perceptions, attitudes, and values are registered only by private survey firms for their corporate clients without the benefit of feedback to those surveyed so that public learning can be accelerated. Governments use polls for policymaking, but they are not actively engaged in seeking the participation of the citizenry in experimentation, public learning, and priority definition. This is ascribable to the bureaucratic view that reduces citizens to the role of beneficiaries and resists their promotion to the role of clients (Godbout 1987).

To the extent that citizens are invited to become active, they will. They will articulate their needs in the forum in the same manner as they express their preferences in the market, and in so doing will indicate the directions in which investment of public resources should be made. Moreover, the new shared understanding of change acquired through interactive searching and learning should result in joint commitment to active adaptive strategies, such as joint ventures. A good way to ensure that research programs are conducted effectively and the results disseminated widely is to ensure that there is a commitment by other parties to work in concert with the chosen research teams.
CONCLUSION

There is little hope that granting councils will become active in the ways suggested above unless they begin to interpret their mandate much more broadly. This will require not only a dramatic change in the personnel making up these granting councils — to represent all segments of Canadian society — but also attention to the portion of their mandate that requires them to develop policies that reflect the needs and expectations of Canadian society, government and the research community.

In the past, granting councils have been satisfied to cater mainly to the needs and expectations of the research community, and any consultation they have carried out has been focused on that community. This is no longer acceptable. Mechanisms have to be designed to obtain a better view of the needs and expectations of Canadians if granting councils are to perform their job appropriately.

Because they have not set up appropriate mechanisms to articulate these needs, the granting councils have become minor players in the construction of a national network of research centres. Whether there are signs that granting councils are taking sufficient steps toward a refurbishment of their personnel and a redefinition of their role to warrant optimism is a matter of much debate. But before governments can assign them an expanded role and additional financial resources, it will have to be clearly established whether they are still hostages of the academic community and agents of dynamic conservatism or whether they have become agencies of social learning and a locus where Canadian needs and expectations are meaningfully recorded.
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