

LECTURE NOTE

The Nepal Intellectual Forum (NepIf), Pokhara, had invited Professor Chaitanya Mishra to deliver a lecture on 'Social Utility of Academic Research' on May 22, 2010. We thank Prof Mishra and the NepIf for providing extracts from the lecture to this publication. -Editors

SOCIAL UTILITY OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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A. INTRODUCTORY

I am pleased to be speaking here at the invitation of the Nepal Intellectual Forum, Pokhara. I think the issue of social utility of research is important and timely. I hope a regular reflection on the utility of past and ongoing research becomes a part and parcel of learning, teaching and policy making at the university, governmental and other levels which consciously engage in education and public policy making. I also hope that the university and other educational institutions support this initiative.

I should also note here that my disciplinary vantage point and experience are necessarily limited. I am a sociologist. I may well, therefore, not do justice to vantage points and issues that are important or in vogue in other disciplines. Of course, sociologists are a quarrelsome bunch themselves--in professional matters at least. I can well imagine, then, that not all of us, who come from very diverse disciplinary and other backgrounds, may be of one mind. In a very important sense, that would be tragic, would not it? It is really diverse backgrounds and minds that let us learn and evolve. I, therefore, regard the diversity gathered here as something very valuable.

B. ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND UTILITY

Let us begin with the key and contentious issue here, that of *utility*. What is utility after all ? Is it one of seeking relevance? Offering illumination on a rather intractable problem? Is it interpretation in the sense of the anthropological emic meaning that actors hold regarding their actions, beliefs, and so on? Or is it seeking of causal or even co-relational explanation—of what are the causes and what are the effects? Or should utility be sought in social critique and in liberation—*a la* the

Critical school of thought? Or is utility akin to generating the political force necessary for social change—in tune with Marx’s statement that interpretation was being ‘overdone’ and what was crucial was to change the social world? Or is it a distinctly reformistic and may I say, economic, narrow and ‘practical’ and applied utility that we are really talking about? The Nepali word *upayogita*, which I think translates the word ‘utility’ well, does strongly bring in this last connotation.

What is of utility and what not fundamentally depends upon what we think the social (and the rest of the) world is like and how we think we can or cannot generate information and knowledge about the world. As we know, there are diverse and contradictory ontologies, i.e. ideas about the nature of reality, universe, world, existence, humanity, etc. in existence. Is the world that is around us or the one we see really real or is only the divine real, (i.e. *brahma satya jaganmithya*)? Is the world an objective reality which exists independently and apart from me or is I and the world one and the same (i.e. *aham brahmasmi* or *tat twam asi*)? If I am part of the world how can I know gaze it objectively, i.e. from a distance, and come to know it? Is it utilitarian to submit to divine will, fate, destiny and so forth *or*, for that matter, to the encompassing political and economic structures at the global and other levels and, thus to minimize the significance of human action except as a carrier of the divine will or global, etc structures? Is the universe astrologically directed and managed? If so, we will surely appreciate the astrology-linked rings in the fingers of Nepal’s many political leaders—not to speak of professors of social science! If so, we shall surely be in the search of knowledge that seeks to further clarify the links between the astrological events and processes and human beliefs and actions. If not, on the other hand, we will cease to see utility in the rings and seek salvation elsewhere, i.e. in maintaining or changing the existing nature of social organization.

Thus, an epistemology, i.e. assumption on the nature of knowledge, belief, etc. regarding reality, universe, etc., come to us attached to our assumption on the essential nature of the social world, i.e. ontology. Different epistemologies, on the other hand, lead to different emphases or prioritization on what is knowledge and how is it acquired. The positivist epistemology asks different questions (or seeks utility in asking different questions) than does epistemologies which are of the interpretive and critical bent. (Please refer to appendix.)

In essence, diverse ontological and epistemological stances bear diverse implications for social research and its 'utility'. As such, there is no single answer to the question of utility. I am myself somewhat torn between the three stances shown in the appendix, although I tend to veer to the positivistic stance. I believe historical social science in the world-systemic vein is the way to go, *a la* the Marxist and the old French Annales schools which Emile Durkheim started. Fernand Braudel, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and the whole world-system school are the proximate intellectual leaders here.

For me, the primary, although not the complete utility of social research lies in its promise to lay down the extremely diverse social settings which human beings create and live within. It is liberating that there is almost nothing given or fixed about human existence. At the same time there is--and there must be--some logic, some pattern to this seemingly infinite diversity at some level of description and explanation. Diversity *and* patterning—the many and the one (or a few hundred!)—is what keeps the social sciences alive.

And then there is history. As one cannot step in the same river twice, a given society is not the same society it was five or ten years ago or one generation ago. Societies traverse across 'time,' i.e. across its own life history, maturity, contradictions and changing forms of interaction with the 'outside' and, in the process, undergo transitions of various kinds and degrees. The society I was born in is not the same society now. Nor is the one I went college to or one I took up my first job. Ascertaining the flowing and changing nature of society—of economy, polity, culture, and so forth—is what makes social sciences so interesting. A society keeps vanishing and, in the process, renews itself and makes a 'sudden' appearance. Research is a hide-and-seek game with the society except for the fact that the society that you find out is not the same society which was hidden. Discovering and seeking out the flowing, changing and 'renewed' society is immensely interesting.

Thus, describing and explaining--and if so inclined, critiquing--structure and history and finding the place of diverse and flowing and changing individuals and groups within diverse and flowing and changing structure and history is immensely interesting as well as challenging. Locating oneself and one's significant others within this moving and flowing society adds concreteness and immediacy to the

enterprise. The utility in all of this is the comprehending of the self and the world in all its diversity and plasticity. I believe this process is immensely enlightening for both the social researcher and the reader. I believe it leads to and satisfies, for the time being, a sense of wonder. It helps both to transcend the here and the now and gaze and diversity and history in all its glory as also to link it with the present. It helps to free both from myopia and prejudice. It helps both to trace out the encompassing and historical 'family tree'. Social research is, thus, immensely humanizing. That is its principal utility.

In essence, for me, *tamaso ma jyotirgamaya* (from darkness to light), in relation to variegated human and social conditions, is both the goal and the utility of social research. Causal explanation of the conditions is the primary goal without, however, denigrating the importance of the epistemological agendas of interpretation, change and others. *Ujyalo chharne* (lighting them up) or, even better, *ujyalo le niththrukka parne* (drenching with light), then is the goal and the principal utility of social research.

For 'from darkness to light' to happen, however, the *tamas* (darkness) we wish to explore, i.e. the research problem, must be defined very closely, concretely and precisely while at the same time fully drawing out its intellectual-theoretical, empirical and social significance. That is, a research problem is a *research problem* because of the empirical, methodological and, above all, theoretical, conceptual and social significance that it intrinsic to it. In addition, of course, the whole process of research, evidencing and conclusion should be beyond reproach. Only such research can contribute to generate a platform for *bade bade jayate tatwabodha* (getting to know the kernel of what is under investigation). *Tatwabodha* can surely be classified as utility.

C. GAINING PERSPECTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING

Good research calls for a re-scaling of space and time (or society and history). It calls for the recognition that the social unit, feature, issue, process, etc. that we are researching occurs not only here in *this* society; nor does it occur only at *this* historical time. *Nothing* occurs only here and now. Everything has a universal or global *and* temporal or historical bearing. Fixing the social/spatial and temporal/historical coordinates of the issue under investigation is fundamentally necessary

in order to gain perspective, understanding, illumination, interpretation, explanation, etc. Fixing the coordinates suddenly lights up the issue under study. This lighting up can surely be defined as constituting utility. The lighting up throws up what is sometimes called the ‘aha! moment’. The whole thing suddenly becomes far more comprehensible than it had ever been. And the ‘thing’ includes us, the researchers. The ‘aha! moment’ forces one to view oneself in an altogether—and, sometimes, fundamentally—different light. Illustratively, when I tell my students that Nepal, Kathmandu in particular, was one of the more developed areas of the world just 400 years ago, they suddenly light up. Their ears suddenly flare up outwards to make certain that they have really heard what they have. Then they begin asking why. Equally importantly, an entirely new energy flows through them. They begin to shed the belief that Nepal was always underdeveloped or poor. They also begin to imagine the possibility of a developed Nepal. They begin imagining of a day when Nepal might reverse the current course. They begin to think that may be that can be done and achieved once again. In essence what I was doing was fixing a new structural-historical coordinate of Nepal’s present state of under-development. Similarly, new information and knowledge on marginalized groups has galvanized the politicization and over-politicization of both the marginalized groups and the society at large. Information (and misinformation) generated through social research, thus, has the power to ‘physically move’ people.

In essence, the preceding calls for the recognition that acquiring an appropriate perspective and understanding calls both for recognizing both universality and specificity *and* historicity and contemporaneity of each and every social issue. This is what intellectuals and academics are charged with if they want to ‘rise above’ on-the- surface empirical events. An issue can be comprehended adequately only when placed within the universal frame and compared against similar others. Similarly, an issue can be comprehended adequately only when placed within a historical frame and compared against similar others located within that particular historical frame. In other words, each issue possesses both a structural and historical specificity. No issue, no place, no person, no group of persons is like any other in terms of its relationship with other issues, places, persons and groups of person or social categories. To this extent, each unit or category is structurally and historically specific. Equally, however, no issue, place, person

or social category is unique such that it is dissimilar from all others. That is, underlying the specificities there is a general pattern to most if not all issues, places, persons and social categories. The search for a high level of utility then calls for a keen sense to finding out what is structurally and historically general and what is structurally and historically specific to all issues, places, persons, social categories, etc. It calls for an implicit or explicit comparative design under which we comprehend ‘things’ both by learning what is similar as well as dissimilar about them.

Illustratively, I have consistently attempted to comprehend the fundamental character of contemporary history and society in Nepal (and elsewhere) as one that is intimately bound with a particular form of capitalism and one that occupies a particular location within the contemporary world-historical world-capitalist system. That is my coordinate. I attempt to illuminate the nature of our society and social institutions somewhere along this coordinate. I believe that each and every aspect of our life and society is intimately connected to this coordinate. Of course, I also keep my eyes open as to how this coordinate is changing and shifting. I ‘instinctively’ know that there is nothing that does not change. Indeed, I keep my eyes open whether global events and theories invalidate a specific component or the whole of my coordinate. My faith in my coordinate is tentative. I keep looking for a better coordinate. I am attached to my coordinate only because I have not found a better one. And I know that there are many problems with my coordinate. The most important of such problems for me was raised by Andre Gunder Frank when he said that capitalism was much more than 500 years old and that, indeed, it might essentially have been with us forever. This one, of course, shakes the very foundation of the world history we were accustomed to. Should this assertion continue to gather weight, uncountable good sociologists and even more uncountable social scientists, academics in humanities and others would have to go to the drawing board and enter into an extended rethinking and discussion over a new coordinate (or, for Thomas Kuhn, paradigm). Now, some others fix the coordinate at ‘semi-feudalism’, ‘pre-takeoff,’ ‘pre-New Democracy,’ ‘post-people’s war,’ ‘pre-constitution’, and so on. I have no dispute with some of these coordinates because they can coexist with mine. But I cannot work with coordinates which are in explicit contradiction or incommensurate with

mine. My coordinate is the one, I think, which is most illuminating and explanatory. It explains more classes of facts much more satisfactorily than any other coordinate. In terms of the vocabulary we are using today, I am wedded to my coordinate because its utility is much higher than any other's.

D. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Let us go back to the issue of the research problem I raised earlier. Academic or intellectually-charged research is not something apart from our daily existence. Indeed, it is about how our social life is organized and why it is organized the way it is and why it is not organized in some other ways, e.g. in the manner it is organized in contemporary Europe or in the manner it was organized during the time of our own great grandfathers, grandfathers or even fathers. The level of utility of an intellectual research will be high to the extent that it goes beyond the collection and proximate analysis of empirical data. Empirical information, of course, is fundamentally important. But it must lead not only to the establishment of empirical relationships, co-regularities or covariance. It must also begin by positing and also lead to assertions of relationships among 'higher-order' or more encompassing phenomena. Let me illustrate. One can see, in data generated in various editions of the Nepal Demographic Health Survey, a rapidly declining total fertility rate. Now this gives us a measure of co-regularity between the fertility rate on the one hand and the time period, generation or cohort on the other. As years pass by, women have been giving birth to fewer babies. And this trend is likely, although by no means certain, to continue. This is an important empirical finding. The next important intellectual task, then, is to seek answer to the question: Why this should be so? Is it related to increasing age of women at marriage? Women's literacy and education, which has been rising? Women's employment? Urbanization? Women's autonomy? Easier access to birth-control devices? Increasing per capita income? Increasingly expensive schooling? Child-directed flow of intergenerational wealth? Child as a consumption rather than producer's good? Increasing (?) incidence of two-earner households? Increasing unemployment and under-employment? Alternative investment opportunities? Growing expectation among some parents that they do not have to rely on children for support during old age and sickness? Modernization? Capitalism? Growing rationality, de-sacralization and irreligiosity?

Immorality? Now, all of these have been posited as causes of low TFR by various authors in Nepal and elsewhere. But the question is: Which is the more foundational cause than the rest? Is women's increasing age at marriage more foundational or is it modernization? (Or, to ask the question another way, is women's increasing age at marriage a cause of modernization or is modernization a cause of increasing women's age at marriage?) Is women's education a more foundational cause or is intergenerational flow of wealth? Which of these two is the more encompassing concept and may lead to a more encompassing theoretical statement? To bring it back to the question of utility, those research problems which invoke more general and encompassing concepts and theoretical statements possess more utility than those which invoke narrower and only empirical level concepts and associations.

E. KARL MARX AND C. WRIGHT MILLS

Karl Marx was probably the first social scientist who explicitly argued that it was mandatory to dive deep in order to acquire knowledge that was valid and, thus, possessed a high level of utility. Indeed, he said that what was 'obvious' was anything but science. That was merely appearance. Science, for him, began below the surface. What he meant was that there was a definite deeper structural and historical logic to the seemingly multifarious actions of the multitude of diverse humanity. The deep structure, the mode of production, was the driver of the society as a whole and of its multifarious manifestations. In essence, the deeper you traversed the more foundational forces did you come across. Causes and explanations had many layers. By diving successively deeper you scanned not only the proximate or immediate causes but you went on to discover causes of causes of causes. The deepest causes, in turn, illuminated and explained more encompassing issues, events, processes, etc. A knowledge of the foundational structures, forces and processes possessed much greater validity and utility.

Karl Marx, of course, also famously argued to the effect that explanation and interpretation of how life, society and the world operate was not the key goal of philosophy and social science. The key goal, rather, was to change the way life, society and the world operated. The key goal was to render society exploitationless and humane. I personally do not all minimize the huge importance of this goal as a human being, a citizen

and a politically-inclined person. But as an intellectual worker, social scientist and social science teacher I place the goal of shedding light, gaining insight and explanation higher to any other. I also foreground these goals because often—indeed, almost always—that criticism and change are pursued without much comprehension and understanding, insight and explanation. I would bet Marx emphasized change not because he downgraded interpretation and explanation but because he was a great, arguably the greatest, interpretator and explainer. I would bet that he would not emphasize change on the basis of a faulty interpretation and explanation.

Most teachers at Tribhuvan University are, as it were, ‘actors’ rather than thinkers. ‘Action,’ in this case, often precedes thoughtfulness. Political party affiliation, for many, precedes intellectual or professional affiliation. Recommendation precedes considered description, explanation and understanding. Most of us find thinking far more burdensome than ‘acting’. The extremely ‘political party-ized’ climate helps this ‘acting’. We let the political parties drench our minds with often perspectives, which are, often, extremely parochial and non-encompassing. In such a situation, we cease to become thinking individuals and intellectuals. We become, to most purposes, party workers who are paid by the University. Indeed, some of us become, in effect, ‘whole timers’ to parties—at least in the sense of loyalty, and not even ‘half-timers’ to our profession. In such instances, we see utility in the party and not in independent intellectual work. Our faith in a political party, whatever the reason, stops us from questioning them, their doctrine and everything associated with them. It also propels us to be prejudiced against other parties—and their members and sympathizers, their doctrines and things associated with them. In such instances we become slaves to a political party. We also become traitors to our own profession.

C Wright Mills re-emphasized this well when he said that the task of sociology (and, I think, social sciences generally) was to map the relationship between self and world, man and society, biography and history and the private and the public. What he was talking about was discovering the connection between the general and the particular or the micro and the macro.

F. PRODUCTION OF NEW KNOWLEDGE

Utility also consists in the production of new knowledge. Unlike school teachers, who are mostly charged with the distribution or sharing of existing knowledge in the classroom, university teachers and researchers are charged, across the world, with the production of new information, methodology, explanation, conceptual frameworks and with theoretical re-ordering. This is the utility of intellectual or academic research. We are paid primarily to become an intellectual worker, not a classroom teacher. That Tribhuvan University does not emphasize this aspect enough is a fact. But it has taken some initial steps in this direction although it is extremely slow at it. (Grey hair continues to be a must in order to become a professor!) And, then, if the University is slow at it, part of the blame must go to us as well. A Ph. D. degree and a professorship or any other teaching position in a university is meant precisely to produce new ways of viewing life and society. A Ph.D. degree or a professorship is not meant to be worn as a badge in the manner of an army general. Nobody flaunts the label of ‘*Pra. Da.*’ in cultures which prioritize intellectual work, creativity and innovativeness. The status of a *Pra. Da.*, in such cultures, is something that needs to be proven each time one assumes an academic or intellectual role.

There is also some utility to engagement in fact-gathering-and-report-writing kind of ‘applied’ research many of us engage in from time to time, often in association with nongovernmental and governmental organizations. Often this does not involve high-quality intellectual, academic, theoretical work. It does not involve exploring the more encompassing concepts and theories we discussed earlier. Nor does it often involve historically and structurally comparative work. Nonetheless, it provides a number of utility to us. First, many students and faculty members often confuse books for the real and living society as something that ‘is not books’. Applied research helps such students and teachers to juxtapose good books on the one hand and actual lives and societies on the other. It helps them to closely examine the correspondence and mismatch between the two. Second, it is important to note that text and reference books utilized here often locate themselves in institutions and processes not here but in Europe or the USA. In such a situation, it is even more important to confront ostensibly ‘general’ texts with the specificities embedded in ‘local’

lives and societies so that the 'general' gets reformulated itself and, in the process, become more encompassing. Third, a discerning teacher can precisely and profusely utilize information and analyses of such 'local instances' in classroom teaching as 'illustrations' to the textual material. This brings into currency both the text as well as the student's and teacher's comprehension of his or her society.

G. POLICY MAKING AND UTILITY

Can academic research be fed into policy—the policy of the state in particular--thus heightening its 'practical' utility? This might well be the principal concern of many social science students and teachers here and elsewhere. This, of course, puts the state and its organs, supra-national organizations and agencies, 'non-governmental agencies,' 'policies,' 'manifest functions,' 'planned change,' etc. at the pedestal. This concern, of course, is tied to Marxist, pragmatist, statist, political partyist, welfarist and many other conceptions of society and the 'common good' (*sarwajanik hit*). Indeed, it is not only the state but also nongovernmental organizations of various hues, political parties and their 'sister' organizations, other political forces, business forces, trade unions, etc. Indeed, there are many who think that the rise of the social sciences during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had to do with the rise of state and the state's demand for large scale, precise and 'workable' information in order to control and appease its 'population,' raise revenues and provide a minimum of 'development' and welfare. Collection of Information, information processing and 'spin' has become integral to all such organizations. So, how can value and utility be added to academic research in this information-rich yet information-starved social world? Organizations use whatever information is publicly available and whatever portrays them in the best light. Of course, they also sponsor collection of information to help them to compete, raise the rate of profit or the level of legitimacy. Organizations are also likely to emphasize short term and private and narrow interests. On the other hand, it is incumbent upon academic and intellectual workers to prioritize studies--and explanation, interpretation and criticism--which are comparative, theoretical and historical while at the same time remaining rooted within, and generating information and explanation about, the specificities of the life and society under investigation. It must be noted that the emphasis

on the historical, comparative and theoretical is also a goal for the future; it is not something that can be achieved immediately. In the longer run, policy making will definitely benefit by encouraging and making use of information which is derived from such an outlook. Ad hoc information, which comes unhinged with history and theory, can only lead to hoc policies.

On the other hand, historical, comparative and theoretical frameworks can become so frozen in the past and in an 'unlike' structure that they tend to become immune to life and society as they contemporarily exist. Such frameworks can become so doctrinaire that they resist almost all new information lest the frameworks come to be questioned. They do not merely lack utility but they possess negative utility. They resist openness, curiosity, questioning, creativity and inquiry. While academic frameworks can become resistant to information and to reformulation, political-intellectual frameworks, because they are aligned far more intimately with power and politics, tend to become much too hardened and to the risk of far too many peoples and citizens and their progress. Illustratively, while the UCPNM has made serious attempts at developing newer frameworks, it appears to be tied much too strongly to old and outmoded frameworks. I have discussed this, among others, in 'Kun itihās, kun Marxbad, kun kranti?' ['Which history, which Marxism and which revolution?'] *Rato Jhilko*, 2009 1(1): 19-34. There is much unlearning to be done here on history, society, historical and structural comparison and on connecting the present with the future. Then there is the whole doctrinaire reading of almost all communist parties in Nepal that Nepal remains semi-feudal and semi-colonial political-economy. I have all along believed and written that this is nonsense. Most of us still believe that Nepal was a 'closed-off country' prior to the 1951. Yet one cannot but wonder how could Nepal, which lay adjacent to the most powerful, globally-hegemonic and expansionary and imperialist capitalist country for over 200 years, could remain 'closed off'. This is yet another historical and structural nonsense. Such instances show that it is not adequate for academic and intellectual research to move towards historical, comparative and theoretical research. It is also necessary to be critical of the framework one is accustomed to and to reformulate the framework relying, in part, on the attributes of contemporary empirical world.

APPENDIX

Comparison of Positivistic, Interpretive and Critical Approaches to Research

Fundamental Assumptions Regarding	Positivistic	Interpretive	Critical
Nature of social reality	Stable existing patterns or order that can be discovered	Fluid definitions of a situation created by human interaction	Conflict fueled and governed by hidden underlying structures
Nature of human beings	Self-interested and rational individuals who are shaped by exothermal forces	Social beings who create meaning and who and who constantly make sense of their world	Creative, adaptive people with unrealized potential, trapped by illusion and exploitation
Reason for research	To discover natural laws so people can predict and control events (Describe, explain, etc?)	To understand and describe meaningful social action	To smash myths and empower people to change society radically
Role of common sense	Clearly distinct from and less valid than science	Powerful everyday theory used by ordinary people	False beliefs that hide power and objective conditions
An explanation that is true	Is logically connected to laws and based on facts	Resonates or feels right to those who are being studied	Supplies people with tools need to change the world
Theory looks like	A logical deductive system of interconnected definitions, axioms and laws	A description of how a group's meaning system is generated and sustained	A critique that reveals true conditions and helps people see the way to a begetter world
Good evidence	Is based on precise observations that others can repeat	Is embedded in the context of fluid social interactions	Is informed by a theory that unveils illusions
Place for values	Science is value free, and values have no place except when choosing a topic	Values are an integral part of social life: no group's values are wrong, only different	All science must begin with a value position: some positions are right, some wrong

Source: W. Lawrence Neuman. 2006. *Social Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. New Delhi: Pearson Education, Low price edition. p. 83.