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Author

SCHAUZ, Désirée

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Abstract

For some years now, the concept of basic research has been under attack. Yet although the significance of the concept is in doubt, basic research continues to be used as an analytical category in science studies. But what exactly is basic research? What is the difference between basic and applied research? This article seeks to answer these questions by applying historical semantics. I argue that the concept of basic research did not arise out of the tradition of pure science. On the contrary, this new concept emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time when scientists were being confronted with rising expectations regarding the societal utility of science. Scientists used the concept in order to try to bridge the gap between the promise of utility and the uncertainty of scientific endeavour. Only after 1945, when United States science policy shaped the notion of basic research, did the concept revert to the older ideals of pure science. This revival of the purity discourse was caused by the specific historical situation in the US at that time: the need to reform federal research policy after the Second World War, the new dimension of ethical dilemmas in science and technology during the atomic era, and the tense political climate during the Cold War. (HRK /

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