

# Politics of Knowledge

Blurb for a panel discussion in the seminar on *Reflexivity and Responsiveness in Law*, University of Lapland, Tuesday 12 March 2019)

Politics of knowledge is an open-ended notion, releasing a whole variety of critical research possibilities. The initial problem for us is the ways in which knowledge and power – science and politics, theoretical and practical reason, facts and norms, description and prescription, and so forth – mix together in the governing of societies. I guess that there is something in this problem that characterizes our Zeitgeist even more broadly. Those keen to dramatic expressions would go as far as to say that we have entered the time of “science wars”: advocates of alternative-facts, such as the climate change deniers, would soon be able to muddy the waters in a way that their more or less comical predecessors, negationist historians of holocaust denial, could never have dreamt. Apart from such topical currents, we would like to try to provide some different type of entries to this rather general problem. Our idea is to approach the problem of politics of knowledge both from the side of science as *production of knowledge*, and from the side of politics as *production of common will*. In the following, there will be five points to get started with the discussion, but the discussion may and probably will lead us somewhere else just as well.

(1.) One prospect would be to consider the possibility of developing a critique of the so-called *knowledge-based society*. Beyond a mere catchword, knowledge-based society means rationalisation of society. It stands for an aspiration to govern societies through proven and undeniable knowledge, more than through procedures of collective will formation and political choices. Consider for instance technology, medicine and ecology, all examples of “hard sciences” type of knowledge that are very much involved in the governing of society. The attraction of hard sciences type of knowledge is probably due to its promise of objectivity: neutrality towards politics and value choices. Yet with technology, health and natural environment, one realises that any science may quickly lose its virtue of objectivity (purity from values) when it gets involved in practices of power. For example, in the context of mining of minerals, some practical solution may stand out as the most efficient one from a technological perspective. Yet this may be not the optimal solution from the perspective of health or natural environment. When equally objective knowledges confront each other on an open field of political deliberation, no meta-level value-free objectivity exists to solve their possible conflicts. One cannot but start negotiating politically about the common good, which is where the contamination starts: preferences, opinions, struggles over hegemony, suspicion of hidden agendas, and other such things will enter the game.

(2.) Secondly, one could turn to human and social sciences and remind oneself of the variety of critical traditions and developments pertaining to our problem in that direction. In the *Frankfurt School* for example, the critique of the dispersion of the positivist mind-set of natural sciences – experimental scientific methods and technical reason – to the field of human and social research is a very old theme (Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas). The *phenomenological* tradition, in turn, starts with a critique of what it calls the unproblematic “natural attitude”, which underlies the objectifying scientific perspective (Husserl). More recently, *Science and Technology Studies* has developed a way of looking at scientific practices of knowledge production – social production of facts, as they would say – from a constructivist perspective pertaining to human and social sciences (Latour). Finally, the French tradition of the *history of science* has been for a longer time interested in the tacit normative effects of science, which effects the French would call “normalization”: the descriptive average turning into a

prescriptive norm (Canguilhem, Foucault). Common to all of these traditions seems to be an effort to focus on the limitations of purely theoretical, empirical or objective reason (Kant) and problematize the facts-norms divide fundamental to modernity (Hume).

(3.) Thirdly, we can turn from the perspective of sciences to the perspective of socio-cultural reality. It is an old project – common to early anthropology, Marxism and sociology of knowledge – to start from a hypothesis that knowledge in the sense of mind's cognitive structure is in fact the product of social structure. In the early days of anthropology, explorations of “primitive” or “savage” mind would reveal the depth of the formative and constitutive power that culture exerts on the way in which people think. Despite its somewhat orientalist undertones, it should still be possible to pose the problem of the ways in which, say, the Chinese thinking and knowing is different from the western thinking. Is it possible that Chinese thinking does not recognize the separation of politics and knowledge at all – the very separation implicated in our problem of “politics of knowledge”? Unlike in the west, where this division is fundamental, in China, all concepts are perhaps practical and theoretical at once, and all knowledge is political to begin with.

(4.) Continuing with cultures, one may think furthermore the relations of domination between the different socio-cultural groups and their knowledges. In this dimension, politics of knowledge comes out in the form of struggles of the marginalized, subjugated or underdog knowledges. These include the knowledge of the oppressed social classes; knowledge of the ethnic, racial, cultural sexual and religious minorities; knowledge of children and elderly, and so on – more recently, even of the rather paradoxical “forgotten knowledge” of the male, middle-class, heterosexual, white bourgeoisie has entered the field. In our context, however, the most interesting sphere would be the struggles of the indigenous peoples to secure the mode of living that is inscribed in their traditional knowledge, protect it from colonisation and appropriation by the hegemonic majority population. As is well known here in Lapland, this opens a contested field of political inclusion and cultural exclusion. Interaction with this field has a great potential of generating awareness in the research community of the mechanisms of objectification and subjectivation pertaining to the structures of science more generally.

(5.) Finally, we may turn to the genuinely *political* element in our compound notion of politics of knowledge. The catchword “participation” may provide us an interesting entry to this dimension. The ideology of participation dictates that everyone touched by collectively binding decisions must have a say in their making. In the first place, procedures of the production of collective will secure that this will happen. Unlike science, politics would start from finding out about the different interests and social goals that different people consider valuable to them. Collective procedures of deliberation and negotiation, mechanism for reaching a meeting of minds, all of this purports to get people committed to a common cause. Participatory techniques of regulation and governance disseminate all over society: from work place democracy to communal land use planning; from corporate governance to co-operative business models; from anti-bullying campaigns at schools to patient sensitive health care; from therapeutic practices to unemployment administration, and so on. Common to all these instances is that the mechanism of participation gives subjects a feeling that they are not living in master-slave relationships, but as respected individuals in a republic of equals. Nevertheless, the methodical streamlining of a discussion through participatory procedures also aims at having everyone recognize the outcome of the collective production of will as binding on them. Therefore, in the second place, the procedures of collective will formation will have to secure quite something other than that everyone has a say. Insofar as the requirements of procedural justice are fulfilled, any rational person cannot but recognize the outcomes as inevitably valid and binding– perhaps not so differently from the truths of science...?