

Whose Knowledge Matters?

Development and the Politics of Knowledge*

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I have argued elsewhere (Weiler 2002, 2006) that the contemporary discourse on knowledge, particularly in Europe and North America, suffers from three major deficits:

First, it does not take a sufficiently critical view of what “knowledge” means, and of the fundamental changes that the concept of knowledge has undergone in the course of the 20th century – so much so that Rajni Kothari from India felt obliged to speak of a “deepening sense of crisis in the modern knowledge system” (1987, 283); secondly, it fails to address the political conditions and consequences of the production and use of knowledge – in other words, it is largely oblivious to the politics of knowledge; and

thirdly, it does not adequately address what kinds of structural changes in higher education would follow from acknowledging both the epistemological and the political transformation of our contemporary knowledge culture.

Without reiterating this general thesis, this chapter argues that the relationship between knowledge and development is a case in point for illustrating the overall inadequacy of the contemporary discourse on knowledge. Specifically, the debate on knowledge and development reveals particularly well how profoundly the notion of knowledge and the practice of its creation and its use is affected by political forces. In this respect, the discourse on development is similar to the discourses on gender roles and on democracy which also, in their own way, testify to the political nature of knowledge.

The politics of knowledge

The process of transformation that the notion of knowledge has undergone in our time has had a lasting influence on our understanding of how knowledge is created, distributed, and used. But it has also confirmed that the linkages between knowledge and power are both very intimate and very consequential, and that arriving at a better under-

* The author has addressed this issue on several previous occasions, including more recently the Colloquium on Research and Higher Education Policy of the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research, and Knowledge in Paris in December 2004 (see Weiler 2006), at the New Europe College at Bucharest in June of 2003, at a Conference of the International Women’s University on “Rethinking University” in Berlin in May of 2002, and at the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s Congress “Gut zu wissen – Links zur Wissensgesellschaft” in Berlin in May of 2001 (see Weiler 2002). Each of these iterations, including this one, has grown several more “rings” around the original tree.

standing of this linkage is crucial to any attempt to formulate a political theory of knowledge and its production.

Recognizing the fact that knowledge and power are closely and symbiotically related is nothing new, of course; it can be found in different forms in the works of Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim as well as in those of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. But it was Michel Foucault (1980) who took up this issue with an acumen that is without peer even in this illustrious company – in his, as Edward Said puts it, “highly wrought presentation of the order, stability, authority, and regulatory power of knowledge” (2000, 239; cf. Escobar 1984–85; DuBois 1991).

Of the many facets of this close relationship between knowledge and power, I wish to highlight four in particular:

- the paramount importance of *hierarchies* in the existing knowledge order,
- the relationship of *reciprocal legitimation* between knowledge and power,
- the *transnational division of labor* in the contemporary knowledge order, and
- the political economy of the *commercialization of knowledge*.

The importance of hierarchies in the production of knowledge

Hierarchies are the quintessential manifestation of power. They signify higher and lower ranks in a given order, domination and subordination, greater and lesser value, prestige and influence. Wherever they occur, they reflect structures of authority and power, and thus the essence of politics.

In the world of knowledge, hierarchies are a pervasive structural characteristic that is manifested in different ways:

- Different forms and domains of knowledge are endowed with unequal status, the natural sciences traditionally – and, on a more subtle level, up to the present day – occupying a leading position, and the less “exact” forms of knowledge being relegated to lower ranks of prestige.
- In the realm of the institutional arrangements for the production of knowledge, there are again clear and more or less recognized hierarchies. Here, the Max Planck Institutes, prestigious American research universities, the *Grands Ecoles* and exclusive *think tanks* form the tip of the hierarchical pyramid which serves to organize the order of knowledge in terms of prestige, resources, and influence, at least at the national level; it has, as we shall go on to show, its international dimension as well.
- Finally, the hierarchical principle also works within knowledge-related institutions – between professor and student, between institute directors and staff, between senior and junior faculty and, if more subtly, between administrators and faculty.

All of these hierarchical relationships are based on more or less explicit agreements on what constitutes an appropriate basis for status and authority in the world of knowledge. In the traditional version of this world of knowledge, such agreements were reached by a relatively peaceful and harmonious process of consensus seeking, some elements of which have been preserved up to the present day. However, as the ideas on what constitutes knowledge that underlie these agreements are being challenged, these hierar-

chies are coming to be increasingly questioned as well. The increasingly open rivalry between Oxbridge and the “redbrick” universities in Britain, the breaking down of hierarchical distinctions between traditional universities and “universities of applied sciences” (*Fachhochschulen*) in Germany, the discussion about junior professorships and the growing debate about continuing the “Habilitation” in Germany are all signs of an erosion of traditional hierarchies; not surprisingly, all of those instances have been accompanied by serious political controversies.

Knowledge and power: A relationship of reciprocal legitimation

My basic thesis here has two objectives: First, to demonstrate that the concept of legitimation can serve a useful analytical purpose outside the narrower sphere of state authority – i.e. in the realm of knowledge and science as well. Second, to show that a problem central to the understanding of modern statehood, namely the relationship between knowledge and power, acquires a particularly sharp focus by being understood as a relationship of reciprocal legitimation.

On the first point, I assume that not only power requires legitimation (which we have known since Max Weber, if not before), but that knowledge is in need of legitimation as well. Just as power, knowledge must have a claim to credibility, and requires recognition of which it must be “worthy”. The history of social thought has seen and debated different foundations for the recognition of knowledge – from the revelation of mystical experience to the deductive logic of scholasticism to the epistemologies of scientific proof. None of these foundations exclusively inheres in conceptions of knowledge itself; they derive their respective strength from social and cultural circumstances as well. The knowledge of Hildegard von Bingen was accorded, in the cultural circumstances of her lifetime, the same degree of legitimation as, in their respective lifetimes, the knowledge of Paracelsus and Albert Einstein. In other words: The legitimation of knowledge, like that of political power, is subject to changes in their respective criteria, and these changes cannot be explained – at least not exclusively – in terms of the content of knowledge itself.

And this is where my second point becomes relevant: that knowledge and power are connected by a relationship of reciprocal legitimation – i.e., knowledge legitimates power and, conversely, knowledge is legitimated by power. There is ample evidence for this symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power, most notably the ever-increasing degree to which political decisions are justified by reference to a particular body of knowledge – from environmental policies to the location of new industries and from the redistribution of wealth to decisions on the investment of public funds. In our complex societies, knowledge and science have virtually become the currency of choice in legitimizing state power (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 102; cf. Gouldner 1970, 50; Marcuse 1964, 158–159). In his interpretation, Ashis Nandy of India takes this line of reasoning yet a step further to its implications for the role of the university:

“As more and more areas of life are ‘scientized’ and taken out of the reach of participatory politics to be handed over to experts, the universities as the final depository of expertise have become a major global political actor of our times. In addition to their

other tasks, they legitimize the ‘expertization’ of public affairs and the reign of the professionals.” (2000, 116)

But the relationship is far from being a one-way street. Just as knowledge legitimizes power, it also derives a great deal of its own legitimation from decisions of the state – decisions on, for example, what is to be learned and taught at schools, what sort of knowledge is required to qualify candidates for public offices and careers, what sort of research should enjoy public funding, etc. In all these and many other decisions that are subject to state authority, *one* type of knowledge is typically given priority over *another* and is accorded special standing and legitimacy. The close and often intricate relationship between knowledge and power manifests itself as an instrument of reciprocal legitimation (cf. Weiler 2001).

The transnational knowledge system and the international division of labor

The frame of reference for a political theory of knowledge is, however, by no means confined to the institutional and the national levels; it would not be complete unless the international dimension is taken into account as well (see Drori et al., 2003). This international dimension is characterized not only by a worldwide information flow that is increasingly facilitated by technology, but also by its own kind of politics. For the apparent openness of the international knowledge system tends to obscure the fact that there are extreme global disparities in access to both the production and the consumption of knowledge. Indeed, one of the most salient features of the international knowledge system is its peculiar division of labor, in which key intellectual tasks, such as setting theoretical agendas and methodological standards, are the prerogative of a relatively small number of societies and institutions that play a disproportionately important role in this system – societies and institutions which are, almost without exception, located in the economically privileged regions of the world.

This particular type of hierarchy in our contemporary international knowledge system is by no means concerned only with knowledge, but reflects quite faithfully the international hierarchies of economic influence and political power with which the international knowledge system maintains a thoroughly symbiotic relationship. This relationship in turn has parallels to the relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power that I have described earlier. This is particularly evident in the case of institutions such as the World Bank, whose role in the international system is by no means confined to exercising influence on economic activity and policy. Less well-known, but extremely effective is the influence the World Bank wields by imposing an orthodoxy of knowledge to which all countries and institutions that wish to enter into negotiations on financial support with the World Bank must subscribe (Weiler 1991; cf. 1988; 1992b).

This paradigmatic hegemony of knowledge norms, which has its origins in Western societies and their scientific institutions, has, however, not gone unchallenged. Indeed, the increasingly intense controversy over a new international system of knowledge is one of the most interesting and significant political phenomena of the last thirty years or so. Instrumental in this “redrawing of the map of world culture” (Böhme and Scherpe 1996, 18–19) were many voices from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab world –

such as Ali Masrui (1975), Paulin Hountondji (1983; 1997; 2002) and Andre Kraak (2000) from Africa; Syed Alatas (1976), Rajni Kothari (1987; see also Sheth and Nandy 1996), Susantha Goonatilake (1984; 1998), Vinay Lal (2000; 2002), Ashis Nandy (1981; 1989; 2000) and Homi Bhabha (1994) from Asia; Clifford Geertz (1983), Stephen Greenblatt (1991), Sandra Harding (1986; 1993; 1998) and Paul Roth (1987) from North America; Pablo González Casanova (1981), Arturo Escobar (1984–85) and Carmen Garcia Guadilla (1987; 1996; 2002) from Latin America; and Michel Foucault (1971; 1972), Zygmunt Bauman (1991; 1992), Helga Nowotny (1994; 2001), Nico Stehr (1992, 2001), Michael Gibbons (1994), Steve Fuller (2000; 2002; 2003) from Europe. These are voices of very different origins and persuasions, but they converge on what Ashis Nandy has described as the call for “a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge” (1989, 267).

The political economy of commercialized knowledge

A final aspect of the contemporary political economy of knowledge production has to do with the growing commercialization of knowledge in the modern world. To be sure, certain kinds of knowledge have always had their economic utility, but it is an important part of our times that the creation of knowledge has come to be regarded and treated so pervasively in economic and commercial terms. This has something to do with the increasing cost of knowledge production and, hence, the dependence of knowledge producers on external financial sponsorship; such sponsorship very often does have an economic and political agenda of its own. More importantly, however, the very nature of modern economic activity has become so massively dependent on up-to-date knowledge of constantly increasing scope and complexity that the linkage between knowledge and both productivity and profitability has become virtually inescapable. This is true not only for the “hard” sciences and their utility for industrial and other forms of engineering, but also for the knowledge of social and psychological processes and its significance for dealing with labor problems, enhancing productivity, advertising, and other forms of “social engineering.”

As a result, a whole new set of power relationships has emerged around the world of knowledge. These relationships are dictated by both the interests and the resources of the commercial users of knowledge, and take a variety of forms – from outright research contracts between industry and universities to more subtle influences on research programs by philanthropic foundations, and from industry-sponsored research institutions inside universities to the setting up of industry-owned research centers in more or less direct competition with other producers of knowledge in the academic realm. The story of Silicon Valley over the last forty years offers a particularly instructive lesson on both the advantages and disadvantages of this new symbiotic relationship between knowledge and commerce in the context of high-tech development (Weiler 2003).

Whatever the specific institutional arrangements, the overall growth in the commercialization of knowledge production has added a further layer of politically constituted interests to the contemporary system of knowledge production: the discourse about the notion of the “knowledge society” reveals upon closer inspection that the politics of knowledge become less and less separable from the politics of production

and profit, which are arguably the most powerful political dynamics in today's world (see, *inter alia*, Braunerhjelm 2000). The international dimension of this kind of dynamic in the politics of knowledge is reflected in the growing debate about including higher education and research in the "General Agreement on Trade in Services" (GATS), designed to guarantee access to national markets by foreign suppliers of knowledge (Clift 1999; Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft 2002; World Trade Organization 2001).

Knowledge and Development

The new discourse on development

It is no coincidence that the issue of knowledge has been at the center of the extraordinarily rich debate conducted over the past several decades on the concept and political significance of "development". Gran sees the dismal failure of development policy in Africa as principally due to an externally imposed knowledge system that has summarily ignored the legitimacy of local, grassroots knowledge (1986). A new discourse on development looms large among the "counterdiscourses" that Escobar has identified in many Third World countries (1984–85) and that appear to be closely connected with a newly heightened concern with global peace (Hettne 1985; Blomstrom and Hettne 1984; Bosse 1978, 37ff.). In his writings, Jinadu emphasizes the parallels between the prevailing incrementalist ideas of development and an instrumentalized role of the social sciences in Africa; he speaks of a

"... view of development as incremental change in technological skills and efficiency and the consequent instrumentalist view of the social sciences that it encourages, [which] has tended to encourage the neglect of critical normative issues in development and in development theories." (1985, 19; cf. Bosse 1978, 191 und 198)

The more recent debate on the impact of globalization on development and underdevelopment in the world deals prominently with the role of knowledge and research both in sustaining a new globalized order, and in subverting it (Torres 2009, especially chapter 6). Ashis Nandy carries this debate farthest in his critique of a development policy that he considers the modern world's fondest – and at the same time cleverest – form of charity (1989, 269). He is even skeptical about the many *alternative* conceptions of development – sustainable development, ecodevelopment, indigenous development – suspecting them of being "products of the same worldview which has produced the mainstream concept of science, liberation, and development". For him, the real challenge is to radically reject the unholy alliance between traditional science and traditional development and construct a "post-modern science" and a "post-development world" (1989, 270).

Majid Rahnema can take credit not only for constantly promoting, and making valuable contributions to, this critical discourse but also for publishing his "Post-Development Reader" (1997), in which he has collected and made available to a wider public some of the most important texts on this subject, including the writings of Arturo Escobar (*ibid.*, 85–93), Rajni Kothari (143–151), Ashis Nandy (168–178), D.L. Sheth

(329–335) and – an interesting European voice in this chorus – Vaclav Havel (336–353).

The common denominator in the work of all these authors – different though they may be in many respects – is the close connection they see between the discourse on development and the debate on the politics of knowledge. To quote Guy Gran once more:

“... the heart of both generating and applying authentically developmental knowledge is the reduction of power differentials ... Power differentials both within a locale and between levels ... fundamentally determine how knowledge is perceived, whose knowledge matters, and the ensuing effectiveness of policies on which it is based” (1986, 287).

Development and the politics of knowledge

Recalling our fourfold typology of the politics of knowledge in the previous section of this chapter, it becomes very clear why the question of “whose knowledge matters” has come to play such a central role in the critical discourse on development.

Institutionalized efforts at development, whether they originate at the national or international levels, have established their own hierarchies of knowledge where certain kinds of knowledge claim higher standing and greater influence over other kinds. Knowledge about development that is validated internationally, preferably through publications in North American or European journals, commands a higher status than work published in the developing regions of the world, often regardless of how relevant or closely connected it may be to the developmental problems of those regions. Similarly, higher status is conferred upon work that conforms to the evidentiary and analytical standards of Western economics and social sciences, often regardless of how pertinent the questions it asks are to the realities of underdevelopment and to available strategies for overcoming it.

The notion of “reciprocal legitimation” as one of the key ingredients of a political theory of knowledge has its own manifestations in the relationship between knowledge and development. Certain kinds of development strategies – e.g., those focused on capital expenditures – derive much of their legitimacy from bodies of knowledge that appear to back up the value of those kinds of strategies, and many research programs and projects at universities and other research institutions support their credibility and legitimacy by pointing out how much their products are in demand (and paid for) by the policy process.

This mutual support linkage is particularly pronounced at the international level where the established institutional structures for advancing development, from the World Bank to regional development agencies, have created, or at least generously nurtured, a corresponding transnational knowledge industry of major proportions. That industry, through its authoritative knowledge products, legitimates the reigning structures of international development assistance and their priorities while in turn having their own existence and direction legitimated by these very structures of the international development effort. The transnational division of labor between center and periphery functions in both realms: the international knowledge order is as much

dominated by the knowledge institutions and traditions of the West as the international development order is dominated by the powerful center of donor and investor agencies.

Within this transnational system of development, the commercialization of knowledge has progressed as much as it has in other domains of public life. The role of the expert development consultant has become a fixture in the world of organized development assistance, and has spawned a highly profitable set of institutions producing development knowledge on demand and at hefty prices. Much, though by no means all, of their work is honest and useful, but there is also ample evidence around the world of the kinds of highly dubious but immensely profitable ventures that John le Carré castigates in “The Constant Gardener” (2004) with reference to the pharmaceutical industry’s testing in Africa.

Conclusion: Whose knowledge matters?

The debate about the politics of knowledge bears, as we have seen, a remarkable resemblance to recent debates about the notion and practice of development. Much of this latter debate focuses on the difference between “development from below” and “development from above”, or between more localized and more globalized conceptions and standards of development. In much the same way, the debate about knowledge is characterized by a similarly polarized tension between knowledge that is more grounded in local and regional traditions and knowledge cultures, and knowledge that rather marches to the tune of universally validated standards and prescriptions.

This dual debate is by no means over, and is still at the center of much international controversy, not least over the role of universities in fostering, preserving and advancing particular kinds of knowledge. For the world of higher education, this controversy over the national and international politics of knowledge has generated some major challenges, including

- the need to acknowledge the fact that the production and mediation of knowledge, especially with regard to such issues as development, is a genuinely political process requiring systematic and critical inquiry, and a process in which both the culturality of knowledge and the role of knowledge in legitimizing political power play an important part;
- the critical examination of the role of traditional disciplines as the dominant matrix for organizing scholarly activity and for the domination and subordination structures that are based on it;
- the critical review of the criteria and methods for evaluating scholarship, taking into account the power structures inherent in these procedures, and for the setting of research agendas and priorities for studying development and underdevelopment; and
- a frank reassessment of the role that institutions of higher education themselves play in the international politics of knowledge (Weiler 1992a, 2005, 2008; Inayatullah and Gidley 2000; Neave 2006).

One of the greatest challenges, however, is for institutions of higher education to critically reassess the role they themselves play in the international politics of knowledge. It is in this sense that Ashis Nandy expects universities to “begin to act as sources of skepticism toward the victorious systems of knowledge, and as the means of recovering and transmitting knowledge that has been cornered, marginalized or even defeated.” (Nandy 2000, 118) That has become particularly important where knowledge about development is concerned.

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