

Knowledge and Power

The New Politics of Higher Education*

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Abstract

Among the major changes that our understanding of the concept of knowledge has undergone over the last fifty years, few are as significant as the realization of the profoundly political nature of the process of knowledge production and dissemination. The politics of knowledge manifest themselves in the hierarchical nature of knowledge systems and knowledge institutions, in the intricate relationship between knowledge and power (which can be construed as a relationship of reciprocal legitimation), in the political dynamics inherent in the transnational knowledge system and its division of intellectual labor, and in the political economy of the commercialization of knowledge. The discourses on development, gender, and democracy provide cases in point. As premier agencies for producing and disseminating knowledge, institutions of higher education are deeply affected by the politics of knowledge, and have to be cognizant of the many ways in which political forces contribute to shaping their programs of teaching and research, the role of disciplines in structuring academic life, the assessment of academic quality, and their relationship to the state. A special issue arises out of the growing tensions between the transnational nature of the global knowledge system and the many ways in which universities are still beholden to national frames of reference.

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Introduction: Knowledge, Change, and Higher Education

The invocation of the notion of a 'knowledge society' has become ubiquitous. Among its many dangers is that it creates the illusion that we know what we are talking about when we talk about 'knowledge'. This paper claims that, when it comes to knowledge, we do *not* know what we are talking about.

More specifically, I argue that the contemporary discourse on knowledge, particularly in Europe and North America, suffers from three major deficits:

1. It does not take a critical enough view of what 'knowledge' means, and of the fundamental changes that the concept of knowledge has undergone in the course of the twentieth century;
2. It fails to address the political conditions and consequences of the production and use of knowledge – in other words, it is oblivious to the politics of knowledge; and
3. It does not adequately address what kinds of structural and other changes in higher education would follow from recognizing both the epistemological and the political transformation of our contemporary knowledge culture.

The purpose of this paper is to address this threefold deficit and to help overcome it.

- I begin by looking at the profound changes in our understanding of what 'knowledge' means and how it is produced (Part 1);
- I then present (in Part 2) the essential features of a 'politics of knowledge' and proceed to illustrate these features by reference to the discourses on the concept of development, on the meaning of gender roles and on the understanding of democracy; and
- Conclude by pointing out (in Part 3) some of the implications that this kind of critical reflection on knowledge has for the future direction of higher education.

The Changing Concept of Knowledge

Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of 'knowledge' has undergone profound changes and has been at the center of major controversies; Rajni Kothari from India speaks of a 'deepening sense of crisis in the modern knowledge system' (1987, p. 283). These changes have to do with the epistemological foundations of our understanding of knowledge, but also with the way in which we assess different processes and institutional forms of knowledge production.

I am referring here to both the criteria for judging the validity and adequacy of knowledge and the structural arrangements under which knowledge is being produced. It is in the debates on these different meanings of knowledge that the political significance of the concept and the intimate relationship between knowledge and power become particularly clear. Altogether, this process presents itself to the observer – as I once put it in an article published some twenty years ago – as 'a remarkable mixture of uncertainty and liberation, of a loss of dependable standards and an openness towards new ways of knowing, of a profound doubt about established conventions in the production of knowledge and the exhilarating sense of a new beginning'. (Weiler, 1993, p. 5)

These changes in the concept of knowledge are reflected and documented in a wide variety of writings and are being articulated by critical voices from highly diverse cultural

traditions: 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; Edward Said from Palestine (1983; 2000); and Michel Foucault (1971; 1972; 1980), Zygmunt Bauman (1991; 1992), Helga Nowotny (1994; 2001), Nico Stehr (1992, 2001), Michael Gibbons (1994), and Steve Fuller (2000; 2002; 2003) from Europe – to name but a few of the diverse voices in this discussion, without claiming that the list is representative, let alone complete.

This process of change in the meaning of knowledge is as diverse as the people participating in it; it involves, among other things, both the questioning of the epistemological tradition of a ‘unified science’ and the demonopolization of a concept of knowledge that has its roots in the natural sciences, as well as the emergence of new ways of knowing.

Challenging the Tradition of a “Unified Science”

The critique of the tradition of a ‘unified science’ questions the notion of a homogeneous and uniform concept of knowledge that can be applied equally to every conceivable object. This notion originated in the epistemology of the classical natural sciences and its extension to the social and behavioral sciences – in line with Talcott Parsons’ classic statement in his discussion of Max Weber’s work: “There is not ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ science; there is only science or non-science and all empirical knowledge is scientific in so far as it is valid.” (1977, p. 61)

The critique of this position has found its sources and manifestations in such developments as the growing importance of phenomenological and hermeneutic forms of social inquiry (Gadamer, 1981; Habermas, 1978; Thompson, 1981), the growing influence of non-Western (Kothari, 1987; Nandy, 1981) and feminist epistemological thought (Belenky et al., 1986; Farganis, 1986, Harding, 1986), and the commotions of post-structuralist and post-modernist debates (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1971, 1972; Lyotard, 1984).

Along these fault lines has emerged a conception of knowledge that is at once more differentiated (in the sense that it differs by the objects of knowledge and the circumstances of generating it) and more contingent (in the sense of statements that are valid only under certain conditions). As a result, some elements of classical conceptions of knowledge have increasingly been questioned. These include in particular

- the notion of *objectivity* – i.e. the independence of the observed ‘subject’ from the observer;
- the idea of the *certainty* of statements across temporal and other circumstances;
- the possibility of *prediction*, i.e. the dependability of ‘if-then’ statements; and finally
- the belief in the possibility of *quantification*, i.e. of representing reality adequately and exhaustively in numerical categories.

As part of this process, there has been a shift of emphasis in the relative ‘worth’ of the general and the specific and on the balance between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge. While these approaches to knowledge remain complementary, the shifting balance between

them is unmistakable, and accounts for a significant change in the pattern of research strategies: in-depth case studies, historical analyses, ethnographic studies, biographical analyses, process, content, and critical incident analyses, and interpretive studies of both literary and social evidence are increasingly competing with the time honoured approaches of hypothesis-testing on the basis of sampling strategies that permit generalization to a theoretically defined universe with identifiable sampling errors. The situation is similar with respect to the tension between 'explanation' and 'understanding' (see Apel, 1984; Roth, 1987; Dallmayr and McCarthy, 1977).

Lastly, the critique of a tradition of scientific rationality geared to the natural sciences has led us to a situation in which knowledge is no longer seen exclusively in cognitive categories, but increasingly in normative and aesthetic categories as well. As a result, both ethical justification and artistic expression are divested of their stigma of being unscientific, and are becoming a legitimate element in a new system of knowledge (Habermas, 1985, pp. 134-137; cf. 1975; see also Putnam, 1987, pp. 53-56; Lenk, 1986, pp. 349-463; Roth, 1987). This development also takes account of the fact that the 'cultural location', and hence the normative disposition, of the observer is a constitutive element in the process of knowledge creation and has a decisive impact on the results of this process – a conclusion that has found expression in the term 'culturality of knowledge', with an increasingly rich yield in the literature (Böhme and Scherpe, 1996, p. 9; cf. Vismann, 1996, p. 106; Greenblatt, 1991).

New Ways of Knowing

The erosion of the canon and legitimacy of a 'unified science' has opened up the process of knowledge production in major ways, giving forms of knowledge previously considered unscientific or extra scientific a new and more legitimate role. It should be noted that the hegemony of the tradition of a 'unified science' has been not only an epistemological issue existing in a vacuum, but has also produced a complex system of institutional mechanisms for setting and sustaining the relevant standards at universities, in scientific publications and in the funding of research. Thus one of the consequences of the erosion of that predominance is also the structural opening up of the system of knowledge production and its institutional infrastructure.

Among the results of that opening is the growing recognition of other and traditionally less esteemed or, indeed, suppressed forms of knowledge. Michel Foucault speaks of the rehabilitation of 'subjugated knowledges ... a whole set of knowledges that once were disqualified as inadequate to their task' and that have now acquired new validity as 'people's knowledge' (*le savoir des gens*) (1980, p. 82). In an article entitled 'African Famine: Whose Knowledge Matters?', Guy Gran makes a case for recognizing African farmers' grassroots knowledge of what does and does not work in African agricultural development as both more legitimate and more effective than the agrarian remedies imposed on them by international agencies (1986).

The formerly rigid boundaries between scientific and non-scientific knowledge are increasingly being questioned, and we have learned to derive powerful insights into the nature of social reality from the literary testimony of writers such as Orhan Pamuk, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass, Chinua Achebe, or Wisława Szymborska, from artists such as Diego Rivera, Robert Rauschenberg, Anselm Kiefer, or Joseph Beuys, or from film-makers like Rainer-Werner Fassbinder, Akira Kurosawa, Ousmane Sembene, or Andrzej Wajda.

Particularly fruitful in this connection is the rediscovery of the relationship between the scientific and literary analysis of social reality, in which sociology has arrived at a new understanding of itself as what Lepenies calls a 'third culture' (1988). He finds that, throughout its history, sociology 'has oscillated between a scientific orientation which has led it to ape the natural sciences and a hermeneutic attitude which has shifted the discipline towards the realm of literature,' (1988, p. 1) producing 'sociology's precarious situation as a kind of "third culture" between the natural sciences on the one hand and literature and the humanities on the other.' (ibid., p. 7)

The Politics of Knowledge

The process of transformation that has been summarized in the preceding section of this paper has had a lasting influence on our understanding of knowledge. But it has also suggested that the linkage between knowledge and power is both very intimate and very consequential, and that arriving at a better understanding of this linkage is crucial to any attempt to formulate a political theory of knowledge and its production.

There is, of course, nothing new about recognizing the fact that knowledge and power are closely and symbiotically related; it has been dealt with 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 who took up this issue with a particularly incisive eye in his, as Edward Said puts it, 'highly wrought presentation of the order, stability, authority, and regulatory power of knowledge' (2000, p. 239).

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

- the critical 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, even up to the present day – occupying a leading position, while the less 'exact' forms of knowledge are relegated to the lower ranks of academic 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, private American research universities, the *Grands Ecoles* and exclusive *think tanks* form the tip of the hierarchical pyramid; this institutional hierarchy

serves to organize the politics of knowledge, at least at the national level; it has, as we shall go on to show, its international variant 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 challenged, these hierarchies 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 abolition of the “Habilitation” in Germany are all signs of an erosion of traditional hierarchies which have been accompanied, not surprisingly, 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, typically reserved for the authority of the state, can be usefully applied to 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 interpreted as a relationship of reciprocal legitimation.

On the first point, I posit 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 like power, knowledge must be able to claim 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.

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 and energy policies to the location of new industries and from the redistribution of wealth to decisions on how to manage financial crises. In our

complex and knowledge-based societies, knowledge and science have virtually become the currency of choice in legitimizing state power (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 102; cf. Gouldner, 1970, p. 50; Marcuse, 1964, pp. 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, p. 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 specific 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 reveals itself as an instrument of reciprocal legitimation (cf. Weiler, 2001).

The relationship between knowledge and power is also, and not surprisingly, the subject of many a literary account. One of my favorite examples is Stefan Heym’s so finely drawn figure of the valiant historian Ethan, who, for the sake of the integrity of his discipline, attempts to refuse King Solomon’s request of writing the official and politically correct ‘King David Report’ (1972) and in so doing becomes the tragic centerpiece of a memorable literary monument to the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power.

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 national level; 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 political dynamics. For the apparent openness of the international knowledge system tends to obscure the fact that there are extreme global disparities in the distribution of both knowledge production and consumption. Indeed, one of the 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 (northern) 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 closely 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 like 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 financing and support with the World Bank must subscribe (Weiler, 1991; cf. 1988; 1992).

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 twenty-five years. Instrumental in this 'redrawing of the map of world culture' (Böhme and Scherpe, 1996, pp. 18-19) were many of the voices from the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab world that I have already mentioned – e.g., Hountondji, Kothari, and many others, including very prominently Ashis Nandy with his call for 'a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge' (1989, p. 267).

The Political Economy of the Commercialization of 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 conceived 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 under which the support and the production of new knowledge is being subsumed. 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 relations, enhancing productivity, 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, however, 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 among the most powerful political dynamics in today's world. The international dimension of this kind of dynamic in the politics of knowledge is 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 (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 2002; World Trade Organization, 2001).

The Politics of Knowledge: The Discourses on Development, Gender, and Democracy

Among the many manifestations of change in the realm of knowledge, three discourses highlight particularly, direction and extent of change as well as its political dimension: the discourses on the notion of development, on the role of gender and on the meaning of democracy.

Development

It is surely no coincidence that the discussion on the relationship between knowledge and development has been at the center of the extraordinarily rich debate conducted over the past several decades on the concept and political significance of 'development'. 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, p. 269). He is even skeptical about the many *alternative* conceptions of development – sustainable development, eco-development, 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' (*ibid.*, p. 270).

The common denominator in the work of the many authors who have contributed to this debate (many of them assembled in Rahnema, 1997) is the close connection they see between the discourse on development and the debate on the politics of knowledge. As Guy Gran puts it: '... 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, p. 287).

Gender

As in the case of development, the critical discourse on gender is also much more than an exercise in redefining a concept, but is closely linked to both the political agenda of the feminist movement and its epistemological claims about 'Women's ways of knowing', as one of the early contributions to this debate is entitled (Belenky et al., 1986; cf. Farganis, 1986; Harding, 1993; 1998; Figueroa and Harding, 2003). This convergence of both a political and an epistemological agenda has yielded a wealth of contributions to our understanding of the role of gender in the construction of social reality and of the many ways in which elements of

patriarchy have pervaded our conception of such issues as performance, achievement, success, competition and, indeed, knowledge (Pateman, 1988). Here, too, the international dimension of the discussion has by now attained considerable importance, especially in the feminist debate of post-colonial discourses on knowledge and development (Charlton, 1984; Sangari und Vaid, 1989; Mohanty, 1984).

Democracy

The increasingly rich discourse on the meaning of democracy, like that on development and gender, also has a dual dimension. On the one hand, it addresses fundamental questions about the nature of democracy in modern societies, especially in terms of the relative importance of representative and participatory elements (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984). At the same time, however, this discourse on democracy is also a discourse on the politics of knowledge and, more specifically, on the democratization of the process of knowledge production and consumption. This aspect of the discourse on democracy is reflected, for instance, in a heightened recognition of the rights of the research 'subject', in the growing importance and acceptance of 'participatory research', in the funding – especially by Canadian and Scandinavian institutions – of autonomous research projects in Third World countries, and – in an interestingly unfamiliar guise – in such images as Ashis Nandy's notion of the 'shaman' as 'the ultimate symbol of non-cooptable dissent' (1989, p. 266).

An important debate in this connection is that on the 'governance of science', which – as, for example, in Steve Fuller's book – deals with the remarkable paradox that scholarship, while in the course of history a significant contributor to the democratization of societies, has at the same time been remarkably reluctant to subject itself to democratic norms of procedure (Fuller 2000, p. 135).

The Politics of Knowledge and the Future of Higher Education

The transformation of the traditional system of knowledge that this paper has thus far described is bound to have major implications for the future orientation of higher education in terms of its organizational and institutional arrangements as well as its cultural norms and properties. This process will confront institutions of higher education with some major challenges, including the following:

- the need to acknowledge the fact that the production and mediation of knowledge 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;
- a thorough examination of the role of traditional disciplines as the dominant matrix for organizing scholarly activity and for sustaining the basic structures of the academic enterprise;
- the critical review of the criteria and methods for evaluating the quality of scholarship, taking into account the power structures inherent in these procedures; and
- a candid reassessment of the role of institutions of higher education in sustaining and shaping the international politics of knowledge.

The Politics of Knowledge in Teaching and Research

Knowledge and the political conditions of both its production and consumption still remain at best a peripheral subject of serious and critical inquiry, generally relegated to disciplinary niches such as the sociology of knowledge, the history of science, etc. Attempts to transcend these niches – by people like Lepenies or Homi Bhabha or Helga Nowotny or Steve Fuller – are, given the importance of this issue, a remarkably rare exception. Ashis Nandy has eloquently described the power of definition, of establishing categories and concepts as the key to understanding the new relationship between knowledge and power:

“The old, clichéd saying, “knowledge is power,” has acquired a new potency in recent years. For nearly a century it was fashionable to study how interests and material forces of history shaped knowledge. The world that has come into being in the aftermath of World War II seems to have reversed the relationship. It has forced us to recognize that dominance is now exercised less and less through familiar organized interests, such as class relations, colonialism, military-industrial complexes, multinational corporations, and the nation-states. Dominance is now exercised mainly through categories, embedded in systems of knowledge. ... The war cry of our times is now: “define or be defined.” ... Universities have come to share this new power, for they specialize in handling categories.’ (2000, pp. 115-116)

This very central challenge to inquiry is and remains very much a secondary subject of study in our hierarchies of research priorities. One of the ideal sites on the academic map to properly address this challenge would seem to be the field of cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*), as postulated by Böhme and Scherpe:

“That today crucial cultural renewals originate in cultures previously considered peripheral, in syncretistic cultures, post-colonial countries and ethnic minorities in the industrialized societies, is a process whose segregating and polymorphous structure can no longer be understood in terms of the humanities; it can only be dealt with by a cultural studies discipline capable of moving flexibly between world culture and regionalism on both an empirical and theoretical level.’ (1996, pp. 18-19)

Viadrina European University at Frankfurt/Oder in Eastern Germany (as whose first president I had the honor to serve) is one of the places where, in a bold experiment in cultural studies, this challenge is being taken up. In one of the better analyses of this experiment, Cornelia Vismann quite convincingly reasons that a modern cultural studies program simply cannot avoid focusing on the production and mediation of knowledge as one of its principal subjects:

“The founding of a Faculty of Cultural Studies at the university corresponds, at the institutional level, to what has been happening on the discursive level over the past twenty or so years: the transition from a closed system of the humanities and social sciences to a new, open knowledge system, which in its turn should now assume the form of a teachable and learnable “discipline”. The transition – or, to put it another way, the blurring of boundaries between disciplines – has itself become significant, namely to the extent to which one of the most prominent fields of cultural studies concerns *knowledge*: its conditions of production, its rhetorical manifestations and its forms of transmission.’ (Vismann 1996, p. 106)

This reappraisal of our understanding of knowledge and of the cultural and political conditions of its production is one of the major challenges facing modern institutions of higher education.

Disciplines and the Structures of Academic Power

The tenacity with which the traditional disciplines have retained their dominance of academic structures is quite remarkable and tends to defy the considerable evidence of their obsolescence or, at the very least, their limitations in adequately dealing with human and social reality. Boundaries between disciplines have been blurred considerably – between economics and political science, between sociology and psychology, and even between the social sciences and the humanities. Theoretical and methodological variation within disciplines is now often greater than between disciplines. Just as importantly, vast new domains of knowledge and systematic inquiry have emerged at the interstices of traditional disciplines and have become the source of important insights into such phenomena as biogenetics, materials research, symbolic systems, organizational behaviour, epidemiology, and social engineering.

One of the reasons why, in spite of all this, disciplines persist so tenaciously has to do with the fact that the organization of science in terms of disciplines is not just a question of academic classification; it also is a question of discipline-based power structures in which decisions are made on personnel matters, resources, publications, libraries, buildings and equipment. Disciplines provide the rationale for professional associations and the organized representation of their interests; they form the framework in which decisions on the funding and the publication of research are made; and they secure the succession of academic dignitaries. But Wolf Lepenies is right in pointing out the profound limitations in discipline-based discourses: ‘The strict invocation of disciplinary identities may be useful in distributing scarce resources and cheering on old-fashioned academic cockfights. ... but it is no longer suitable as a stimulus for intellectual ideas.’ (1997, pp. 93-94)

Higher Education and the Changing Role of the State

One of the key parameters for the politics of knowledge is the changing relationship between higher education and the state in many parts of the world. The net effect of these changes is an increase in the degree of the university’s self-determination or autonomy, at least from the state. This proves to be an ambivalent situation in at least two respects. On the one hand, especially where the university’s greater autonomy is a result of the state’s fiscal crisis, the university is likely to enter into sponsoring relationships (with tuition-paying students from certain segments of the society, with business interests or with philanthropic or international agencies) that are likely to establish new and different kinds of dependency. Whether or not this is the case, however, greater institutional autonomy for the university tends to be resisted by faculty which has traditionally enjoyed a considerable degree of *individual* autonomy even in situations where state control kept the university’s *institutional* autonomy rather strictly limited.

In this respect as in others, the modern university reveals one of its most intriguing traits: that of profound ambivalence about its own identity and purposes. One can argue, as I have done elsewhere (Weiler, 2005), that this ambivalence is at once a defense mechanism against overly powerful accountability pressures upon the university (an institution that is ambivalent about its purposes cannot very well be held accountable for whether or not it has achieved those purposes), and the result of a profoundly ambivalent attitude of society about the nature of the university (as between the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and

the satisfaction of societal and economic needs). The relationship between higher education and the state under these conditions of ambivalence will remain one of the key issues for both policy and research.

The Politics of Knowledge and the Assessment of Academic Quality

Not surprisingly, the evaluation and assessment of scholarship is one of the most contested domains in the politics of knowledge; after all, it is the evaluation of scholars, students, research proposals, manuscripts, and publications that determines the principal rewards of academic life: peer recognition, institutional standing and influence, research grants and, most importantly, publication. This is where academic laurels are awarded and where scholarly effort is rewarded. This is where power is being wielded.

This assessment process tends to be fundamentally conservative in the sense that it is guided by what has proven its worth, and duly skeptical about what has not yet been tried and tested. Disciplinary identities, methodological orthodoxies, and the continuity of research traditions are tried and proven; interdisciplinary research and the addressing of new questions with new methods mean discontinuity, treading new ground, and taking risks.

This kind of caution has been a reasonable safeguard for preserving valuable scientific legacies; it has also, however, increasingly become a significant feature of everyday academic life and the reality of our academic institutions; in its worse incarnations, it tends to act as a brake on the necessary process of constant renewal of our concepts of knowledge. It is here that the traditional hierarchies of knowledge manifest their power most clearly and effectively, and that the difference between powerful and powerless knowledge becomes tangible.

Hierarchies become capable of innovation by being accountable. Hierarchies – and this is also true of the hierarchies of knowledge – are not intrinsically incompatible with innovation; they become so by failing to comply with the requirements of transparency and accountability. Unlike some of my German colleagues with whom I interact on questions of university reform in Germany, I am not troubled by strong university presidents, an academic system based on quality assurance or a system of research funding governed by intense competition – as long as the decision processes and criteria are transparent and open to critical dialogue with those concerned and affected. This applies equally to the grading of written examinations and to the decisions of research funding, to academic appointments and to university admissions.

Creating this very transparency and accountability is a political challenge of the highest order. The current academic climate in many countries, notably in Europe, has in recent years fostered some remarkable changes – changes in governance, in the status of professors, in programs of study, and in university financing. Creating transparency and accountability is an issue, however, on which there is still room for further progress.

Transnational Knowledge and National Universities

It has always been difficult to reconcile the national origins and frames of reference of universities with the fundamental internationality and universality of knowledge and scholarship. Given an international and transnational knowledge system that is

characterized by increasingly salient conditions of inclusion and exclusion, of privileged and underprivileged knowledge, this issue is acquiring special urgency, confronting institutions of higher education – and not only them – with a momentous challenge (cf. Inayatullah and Gidley, 2000; Weiler, 1995).

This has something to do with issues such as foreign-language study programs, internationally comparable degrees, the acceptance of credits obtained while studying abroad, etc. But given the nature of the international knowledge system, it is even more important to provide students with the skills they need to critically monitor the process of globalization and to assess its conditions and consequences. This, however, is only possible if the Western world's largely monocultural institutions of higher education become, in scholarly and curricular terms (and not only in extracurricular and folkloristic activities), real centers of cultural encounter and multicultural discourse. At such centers, debates on the question of whose knowledge matters would be a normal and integral part of teaching and research, where what Rajni Kothari once called the transnational knowledge system's 'homogenizing monoculture of the mind' (1987, p. 284) would be consciously subjected to critical and self-critical reflection. And where it would be the rule rather than the exception that someone like Homi Bhabha teaches in Chicago or Harvard or Berlin.

This critical role of academic institutions with respect to the transnational knowledge system has something subversive about it. Ashis Nandy sees some institutions of higher education in the Third World making courageous and imaginative efforts 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.' (2000, p. 118) And where the knowledge institutions of the West and the North are concerned, we would do well to heed Wolf Lepenies' reminder: 'It is high time that Western societies change from being cultures of lecturing to being cultures of learning.' (1997, p. 40)

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