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## **Working Paper N° 330**

**Epistemic Cultures: Towards a New Sociology of Knowledge**

# Epistemic Cultures: Towards a New Sociology of Knowledge

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*"Knowledge is like light. Weightless and tangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere."*

(World Bank 1998:1).

*We need "a new way of thinking", "clusters of expertise and talent to succeed in the New Economy."*

(Tony Tan, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, 27-03-00)

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. *Forms of Knowledge*

In his influential work "Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft" (Types of Knowledge and Society) Max Scheler (1924/1960) sees knowledge as an existential phenomenon, a "Seinsverhältnis", which serves different purposes: the development of personality, salvation in a religious sense, political domination and economic achievement. Positive scientific knowledge is only one of several forms of knowledge, which is in itself dependent on the absolute reality of metaphysics (Maasen 1999:15). There are two 'Seinsbereiche', namely ideal factors ("Geist" or spirit, i.e. ideas, values, predispositions, knowledge) and

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<sup>1</sup> Work on this paper started with the preparation of a research programme for the Institute of World Society, University of Bielefeld. I am grateful for discussions and helpful comments from my colleagues, among others Karin Knorr Cetina, Peter Weingart, Helmut Willke and Rudolf Stichweh. The paper was written while I was a member of the Research Group on Knowledge Society, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore. I am grateful to the members of the Research Group Sayid Farid Alatas, Zaher Baber and Thomas Menkhoff as well as other staff members of the Sociology Department for useful comments. All errors are, of course, my own.

real factors (social or material conditions), that determine the selection of which knowledge is created, formulated and believed to be relevant. Platonian idealism and cultural relativism are combined into the core field of a sociology of knowledge.



The basic distinction between the imagined and the real, between spirit and social structure, between ideology and social class has, indeed, been a central issue in the sociology of knowledge since Marx' nd Weber', Scheler' and Mannheim' classical studies. It is still an underlying assumption in Habermas' brilliant essay on "nowledge and Interest" and it has stimulated many empirical studies ever since. Authors have varied in their evaluation of the relative importance of *Ueberbau* (superstructure) on one hand or economy and society on the other, until the issue vanished under the onslaught of radical constructionism. Radicalising the Berger/Luckmann thesis on the social construction of reality, all knowledge is seen as constructed. Even the distinction between the humanities and the exact natural sciences, forcefully argued by Dilthey is demolished and the primacy of positivist thinking is challenged.

Construction and deconstruction has been a forceful intellectual enterprise, and storming the citadel of the orthodox consensus has not been an easy task. But while constructionism is still producing interesting results, especially in the sociology of science, new social constructions of reality are putting pressure on the social scientists to search new theoretical horizons beyond modernity, globalisation and the knowledge economy.

### ***1.2. The Neo-Sciences***

Contours of the new world system, of globalisation, a new information economy and a knowledge society became visible during the last few decades of the 20th century, very much like the industrial revolution and the emergence of a capitalist society attracted the attention of theoreticians during the 18th and 19th centuries. Then as now social scientists

grappled with the problem of how to find concepts to describe and explain in acceptable terms what they were observing.

Notwithstanding the indecision of the academic community on what to do, globalisa

### ***1.3. Globalisation***

Recent writers appear to agree "that economic globalisation - defined as the progressive integration of the economies of nations across the world through the increasingly unrestricted

use of these terms has not added to their clarity, but the fuzziness or even lack of definition may be seen as an expression of the wide-ranging and complex field (in the sense of

of knowledge, which is then transferred or sold to other productive units. Knowledge and not just IT (information technology) is increasingly recognised as the main promoter of the new economy, even by the advertising industry. As just one of many examples let me cite a

consultants or an organisation know, the more valuable become individual pieces of knowledge; or to put it differently: Knowledge is needed to utilise knowledge effectively (Willke 2000:2)<sup>3</sup>.

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A knowledge society is believed to have the following characteristics:

- Its members have attained a higher average standard of education in comparison to other societies and a growing proportion of its labour force are employed as knowledge workers.
- Its industry produces products with integrated artificial intelligence.
- Its organisations - private, government and civil society - are transformed into i



### 2.3. *The Growth of Ignorance*

The path towards a knowledge society is, however, beset by some major essential problems. Globalisation brings about a vast increase of what we know, but an even greater amount of ignorance, i.e. of what we know that we don't know. While

*Signboard seen at a fortune tellers office:*

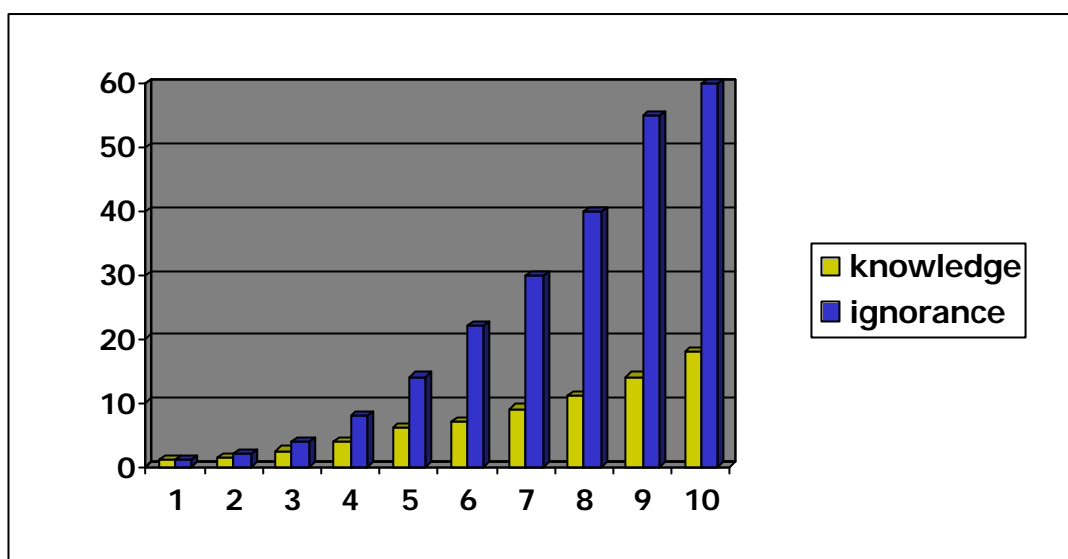
**"Closed due to unforeseen circumstances"**

on one hand we are truly heading into the direction of becoming a "knowledge society", we also become more ignorant at the same time (Evers 2000a, b). Each time a research project is successfully concluded, a number of new questions arise. While knowledge is increasing fast, the knowledge about what we do not know is increasing even faster. Reflexive modernisation is stimulating the growth of ignorance, because new knowledge is put into question as soon as it appears. Thus the growth of ignorance is a reflection of the growth of knowledge. The faster the wheel of knowledge production is turning the greater uncertainty is likely to become.

On a global level we are truly ignorant and knowledge recedes behind the universal lack of data (Lachemann 1994). Modern globalised knowledge society is therefore also a "risk society"<sup>4</sup>, in which the known unknown surpasses knowledge and in which development takes place under conditions of great uncertainty.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "risk society" was popularized by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, though in a somewhat different sense.

Diagram 1 **The Growth of Knowledge and of Ignorance (fictional)**

This condition can be exemplified by examples from everyday life as well as from high-tech developments. It has become extremely risky to cross a road by foot, because we really don't know which car or motorcycle will suddenly appear in front of us. We don't know for certain whether or not an atomic energy plant will experience an accident with disastrous consequences and even experts are not able to tell us in advance, in which direction exchange rates will head. It is extremely "risky" to speculate in the future's market of commodities, stocks or currencies. It is only after the fact, after the crash, that economists or social scientists come up with an explanation, which more often than not is based on conjecture rather than on hard facts or knowledge.

### 3. **Epistemic Culture and the Production of New Knowledge**

#### 3.1. *Knowledge Production*

To achieve the status of a knowledge society, it is enough to buy and to consume knowledge, but also to produce it. For any society and any nation state it will be crucial whether or not this will be achieved. Innovation, production and application of new knowledge and use and dissemination of information will be decisive for the success or failure in moving ahead in a globalised economy. The growing number of research institutes

and universities, of consulting firms and local experts, disseminating, applying and, hopefully, also creating new knowledge underline the importance of knowledge production.

As has been shown in recent sociological studies, the manufacture of knowledge cannot be explained and stimulated as a rational process alone as it rests as much on social interaction, life-world experience and culture.

The emergence of a productive epistemic culture (culture of knowledge production) is difficult to achieve. Culturally deterministic explanations, that try to show why certain cultural values hinder the development of science and research are as unsatisfactory as theories that tried to explain business success or failure in cultural terms alone. I submit that cultural theories of another, not deterministic but constructionist persuasion could be mobilised to achieve better results. The preconditions for the development and the growth of epistemic cultures and their shape and contents should be investigated and understood to explain the morphology of knowledge production, the mountains and valleys in the landscape of a global knowledge society.

### ***3.2. Epistemic Culture***

The theory and methodology of epistemic cultures was developed in a recent book by Karin Knorr-Cetina (1999:1): "This book is about epistemic cultures: those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms—bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence— which, in a given field, make up how we know what we know. Epistemic cultures are cultures that create and warrant knowledge, and the premier knowledge institution throughout the world is, still, science." Her emphasis is not on the creation of knowledge, but on the construction of the machineries of knowledge construction. Technical, social and symbolic dimensions of intricate expert systems are combined into the epistemic machineries of science research. Unlike Anthony Giddens (1990) who is mainly concerned with the output, i.e. with the knowledge produced by the scientific-technological elite, Karin Knorr-Cetina discusses the culture of expert systems themselves.



- who are relatively independent of outside control,
- who work closely together
- but are pitted against each other in competition for resources, recognition and excellence.

In many aspects epistemic cultures resemble the culture of markets.

- There are stringent rules of conduct but
- no undue regulation of values or prices;
- there is competition but no open conflict and
- there is a high degree of autonomy of decision making<sup>6</sup>here isdaytlife bypectipof va41esignmii6I627



### 3.2.4. Epistemic Organisations

In the classical sociology of knowledge the 'free-floating intelligentsia' (Mannheim ) and the independent scholar occupy the centre stage of knowledge production. In the New Economy and in knowledge society this is no longer true. We are forced to admit that organisations have become the main producers, depositories and users of knowledge. The isolated scholar, surrounded by books and papers in an ivory tower, is no longer the idealised figure of epistemic culture. Organisations are transformed into intelligent organisations, which can, if properly organised, endure mediocre members. There are, of course, exceptions, like universities, that seem to be slow learners, inadequately equipped to accumulate knowledge. They therefore have to rely on intelligent staff, which finds it increasingly difficult to compete with the intelligent, learning organisations of the corporate world.

Universities seem to have lost their near monopoly of basic knowledge production. The so-called triple helix of science-industry-university indicates that knowledge production has become polycentric and knowledge networks connect the respective organisations (Baber 1999). The imbalance of enumeration of knowledge workers in the three components of the "triple helix" can be partly explained by the shift of relevant research from the university to the corporate sector.<sup>7</sup>

The "culture of organisations" is turned into an epistemic culture, a culture of knowledge production and utilisation. Individuals are no longer viable as epistemic subjects, but have become

Looking only at the corporative world of huge epistemic organisation like the German-American-Japanese Daimler-Chrysler-Mitsubishi corporation would mean missing out on other big and complex epistemic fields, like high tech areas of the Silicon Valley type or financial markets. Wall Street, the Frankfurt financial district, the City of London or Shenton Way in Singapore do not function without their janitors, cleaning brigades, brokers, traders, internet lines, data banks, organisation charts, government control, stock market analysts, currency regulations, fast-food restaurants and night club dancers. Most of the trade in these financial centres is trade in symbols, information and knowledge. Shenton way or Wall Street are, indeed, gigantic epistemic machineries that reconfigure all of their actors and integrate knowledge and actions, data and desires, symbols and power. Knowledge production is no longer a space bounded by the wall of a monastery or laboratory, the ivory tower of a university or the organisational plan of an industrial company. The boundaries between knowledge and society are blurred and epistemic cultures are complex blobs of knowledge, actions and emotions.



## 4. Conclusions

To sum up my argument: The rapid integration of nations, regions and localities into the



world economy, the increasing density of communication networks and the diminishing importance of national boundaries for the flow of commodities, capital, workers, information and knowledge have established conditions for the rise of a knowledge-driven world economy and society. Epistemic cultures of vast knowledge producing and processing organisations increasingly structure society. The old question of classical sociology, initiated by Karl Marx and Max Weber, whether the relations of production or rather knowledge and the spirit of capitalism determine economy and society seems to have been settled once

and for all in favour of the Weberian position. Knowledge governs economy and society. But now this process appears to reach a new stage, not thought of by Scheler, where *Sein* und *Bewusstsein* merge and knowledge becomes a reality. This is the new reality with which a new sociology of knowledge has to contend.

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