

Such Views Miss the Decisive Point...

The Dilemma of Knowledge-Based Economy and its Opponents

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1. In face of neo-liberal educational policies and the debate on intellectual property it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that knowledge is a common property and that its production and distribution may not be possessed by a certain group or individual and their or his/her interests. Attempts to democratize the access to knowledge, like for example the socialist people's house and workers' club movement at the beginning of the 20th century, appear to have become historical exceptions in times when knowledge is being economized and patented and education is being privatized and standardized, when discussions on elite universities are on the agenda and copying is made a crime. Today, knowledge based on ownership rights is treated both nationally and internationally as a promising commodity. According to Yann Moulier Boutang, knowledge, as an economic good, must possess two features to establish itself as a commodity: the principle of exclusivity and of rivalry in use: «Exclusivity means that by belonging to one owner everyone else is prevented from utilizing the rights on this economic good. Rivalry in use means that it is not compatible with another use.» (Moulier Boutang, 2003, p. 275)

However, for the reason that knowledge as a commodity is also based on cooperation and communication – value in the actual sense is attached to it only when used – the neo-liberal paradigm gets stuck in a dilemma. On the one hand, knowledge is intended for unrestricted use, while on the other, it has to be consumed as a commodity to generate value. The utility value of knowledge, though, as a commodity as well, can never be completely controlled or measured due to its immaterial form. This is proven by the innumerable examples of «illegal» software and data use, alternative information channels, anti-globalisation newsgroups, and MPG downloads. The neo-liberal paradigm gets into trouble, because controlled access to knowledge goods and information not only creates new global differences in power, new forms of resistance and subversive practices, but also entails that it becomes dependent on knowledge practices and forms of acquisition that cannot be generated and administered institutionally and that are not promoted or funded, but are instead distinguished by the fact that they organize themselves.¹ The much-hyped market of neo-classical theory thus proves to be precarious in terms of providing the necessary resources for producing knowledge, which it in turn needs for its competitiveness. The fact that the existing, aforementioned logic of ownership, which turns knowledge into a commodity, simultaneously hinders «innovation», constitutes a fundamental contradiction in the current debate on intellectual property. While it was always a problem for capitalistic societies to protect private property, protection of ownership with regard to knowledge as a commodity now becomes an irresolvable and above all contestable paradox.

Parallel to the world-wide resistance against the economisation of knowledge, the most radical educational reform since the introduction of compulsory school attendance is being carried out in Europe. Knowledge production and distribution at educational institutions is reorganized by the Bologna Declaration²; the bureaucratic apparatus and new structures of control (quality management, etc.) are being expanded. As a result, the situation of knowledge workers is becoming increasingly precarious, and pressure is put on students to adhere to new logics of time and efficiency. This means that institutes at public universities must themselves organize and finance their work entirely through third-party funding, while at the same time statements of achievement are published in glossy brochures, elite study programs are established, and new staff is employed to enforce the policy of reform which is aimed at standardizing the ways in which knowledge is imparted. It also means that lecturers are fired and the duration of study is reduced. All this abolishes studies in the literal sense of the word, while certain fields of learning and knowledge production are outsourced.³

So the field of tension between ownership rights and common property is a conflictual one, not only for neo-liberal argumentation or our ways of working and living, but also for knowledge production in traditional educational institutions. This conflict is becoming increasingly intense under the conditions of a knowledge-based economy, because what the neo-liberal knowledge managers and education bureaucrats are trying to enforce against the resistance of students and the teaching staff is based on the assumption that knowledge can be produced like in a factory and can therefore be accelerated and optimized, and that access to knowledge can be controlled in a capitalistic sense by means of issuing patents and monetization and by exclusively being linked to a specific use.

2. The production and distribution of knowledge, however, is ambivalent and contested not only since recently; it is closely connected with the question of class difference, access to education, and exclusions based on «race» or gender.

The objective of the socialist-oriented people's house and workers' club movement in Germany in the early 20th century was to secure access to bourgeois knowledge resources. For Herbert Marcuse, the socialist ideal of educating the people, of making available for the <masses> everything that had until then been created in culture in order to raise the «people's level of physical, intellectual and moral education», meant nothing more than winning over these <masses> for precisely the societal order that was to be attacked. The democratization of the access to the existing bourgeois knowledge complex thus missed the decisive point: «the supersession of this culture.» 4

In the battles of 1968 in Western Europe and the United States, the dominant Eurocentric knowledge cultures and their systems of order were radically called into question against the background of cold war politics and postcolonial liberation struggles. Demanding one's own knowledge production expands and criticizes the <concept of provision> and refers to the fundamental critique of an institutionalized conception of democracy: Since the 18th century, and therefore also in the colonies, educational establishments have been able to assert the power of definition with regard to relevant knowledge and establish in the respective societies an order distinguishing between necessary and unnecessary knowledge. Knowledge originating outside academia, beyond the disciplines – indigenous, oppositional or everyday knowledge – was at best a resource for bourgeois knowledge activities and their professorial authorships. A system of authorship thus asserted itself along these lines in the natural sciences and the humanities; but it is also clear that every <invention>, discovery or finding is based on the research and insights of many. Although the collective and socially varied character of almost all knowledge is obvious, alternative and jointly organized forms of knowledge production were neither funded nor granted an appropriate status at the university in the West. What was demanded in 1968, then, was not only enhanced access to existing knowledge, but also collective forms of knowledge production in which not just upperclass students but the entire population was to participate, with the goal of generating <new knowledge> that would also reveal the power structures inherent to the traditional order of knowledge. Instead of pursuing the «transformation of the world into a gigantic people's educational establishment», emphasis was placed on a culture of jointly produced knowledge to which marginalized groups also contributed. At the same time, experiments in collective and self-organized forms of life and work took place that criticized the separation between manual and intellectual labour, between production and reproduction, and attempted to overcome these separations in everyday life. From then on, knowledge production could no longer be discussed as merely a university-specific affair, but also as a speech act and an act of self-assertion beyond the <ideological state apparatuses>. This perspective can be found in the research conducted by the Birmingham School (CCCS) as well as in the cultural studies of the GDR on workers' and everyday culture.

Today, studies on subculture, counter-publics and social movements are part of the university apparatus, (e.g. cultural or gender studies). In times of neo-liberal educational reforms – and in a strange parallelity to them – they are being set up at European universities increasingly as advanced qualification courses. However the inclusion of formerly delegitimized knowledge production does not remain uncriticized. At the Conference <Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future>, 1990, the U.S. American theorist Michele Wallace already called for contemporary cultural producers, who are struggling with the conflicts of high culture in various institutions or with pop cultures and their increasing market orientation, to be included in the academic discourses and their practices.

This position propagates a politics of bringing together knowledge produced at universities with the social, cultural and political players, instead of using (sub)cultural practices in a speculative fashion as formulas for theorizing. The transgressive, non-institutional knowledge practices and those conducting research along with their subjects of study should be set in a new relation, one that reflects an involvement in power relations as much as it does a participation in cultural and political emancipation movements.

The critique of objectifying the subject of research or the assumption of a dichotomy between university knowledge and political practice, as well as the demand for including the players on which research is being done, however all miss the decisive point: the trans-disciplinary, social and collective character of knowledge production on the campus and elsewhere. The <subjects of research> have long since produced relevant knowledge themselves; some come from the university apparatus but have chosen a different career, because <their> issues were not discussed in academia or not reflected upon under the conditions of their social production, with regard to their consequences in everyday life or for political practice. Moreover, social movements, such as feminism, the African-American liberation movement, or queer culture, have created new contexts of knowledge and their own theoretically relevant and socially active discourses. The inclusion of political and popular debates and players in academia is only one of the many answers to the question as to

who, under the prevailing institutional paradigm, participates in what way in producing which kind of knowledge under which circumstances and with which resources. 5 In addition, the building of bridges between (sub)cultures and science still appears to presume that the one side conducts research, while the other predominantly acts, (i.e. <makes> politics or culture), without grasping the university practice as a space of action as well.

3. With the concept of the <plurality of intelligences>, Deleuze and Guattari described a multitude of knowledge forms as relevant and set them in opposition to the Cartesian dualism of thought and action. This approach is based on the notion that knowledge is produced, represented and conveyed in a specific as well as general way – in affective, symbolic, societal, and action-oriented forms, and not merely in scientific systems. The traditional university-specific concept of knowledge was regarded to a large extent as reductionist. What is important here, is Deleuze/Guattari's reference to the production of art that includes various cognitive, technical and sensory abilities and for this reason is a very special mode of knowledge production.

The art historian Irit Rogoff assumes that contemporary art and visual culture no longer makes available, illustrates, analyses, or translates already existing knowledge through other means. Instead, art today is both a genuine mode of research and a means per se for producing knowledge. 6 So beyond the relevant forms of institutional critique, particularly in the field of art and cultural production, a new perspective on social, collective and transdisciplinary methods has evolved which is also a point of reference for those participating in the 6th Werkleitz Biennale's <Halle School of Common Property>. Even though Irit Rogoff's assumption describes the essential core of the new form of cultural production, it remains too general, as it simultaneously obscures the actual context of this development. The paradigm change has not only occurred within art but in a dialogue with social movements, subcultures and popular cultures, and corresponding theoretical debates. After all, <art> itself is a diversified mode of production ranging from artworks created by individuals to collaborations between artists and co-operations with persons from the most diverse fields of knowledge. In addition, not all players involved in representation are equal in social terms or represented in the same way. Because even if cultural knowledge is produced collectively and socially, it is conveyed in a traditionalist manner via the figure of the individual author. In the shadow of this figure, a practice of collaboration has established itself over the past 30 years in the form of trans-disciplinary, temporary groups and self-organized <projects> that are situated between theoretical, artistic, filmic, curatorial and activist practices.

Paradigmatic projects like the New York exhibition <If you lived here> at the Dia Arts Foundation (1989) opened up the gallery for debates, themes and groups that formerly had no access and included them in the joint content-related design.7 The potential of alternative use of the art space lies in the origin of the institution itself: critical themes are not indiscriminately brought into the gallery, it is rather its character that constitutes a certain form of knowledge and subjectivity (like the androcentric principle of authorship) in which the critical practice intervenes. Opening up the space of art for other social groups and involving diverse culturally, politically and academically committed players not only shifts the hierarchy of disciplines but also facilitates new modes of knowledge production, which have been tested especially in feminist art projects since the 1970s. This practice takes up from gender-theoretical debates demands for establishing and empowering non-hetero-normative subject positions as well as questions pertaining to relations of production and collective authorship. In the process, the <white cube> with its artificial and semi-public character and the objectivity of legitimate knowledge are reinterpreted and questioned in the work on the respective object. Existing knowledge is not celebrated in the form of illustration or reconstruction, instead, own theses, methods and formats are developed in a kind of applied theory and practice.

The alternative utilization of canonized spaces for debates, meetings, workshops, film programs, and community projects by groups of artists, leftist, anti-racist and feminist collectives, and consumers has commenced and can be regarded, in the sense of Michel de Certeau, as the attempt to appropriate and redefine hegemonic structures – knowing very well that they will not just «disappear». A corresponding transgressive and hybrid theory-practice in the academic field, provided with the appropriate resources, still remains an exception. 8 In contrast to the debates in the cultural and activist field, the restructuring and privatization of the educational system, as well as the notion of knowledge as an economic good of a so-called (knowledge-based economy) fail to recognize the transgressive dynamics inherent to all knowledge, be it elitist, indigenous or popular: It changes and spreads through everyday readings, orally, through popular appropriation, and medial reinterpretation. It is altered through misuse and new interpretations, becoming a rumour or a lie; its meaning is increasingly shifted through contextualization or indigenization. Knowledge practices, then, that belong to the readers and not to the authors and the managers of the

rights of exploitation produce new knowledge on a daily basis, knowledge that is linked to social relations and engenders new socialities. These forms of world-wide and often local knowledge practices were perhaps the most innovative long-distance runners in the history of knowledge production. In contrast, the fixation on authorship, notation, administration, and the monetary profitability of knowledge, which stands in a specific relation to precisely these forms of knowledge, harbours huge drawbacks that the current neoliberal regime is by no means willing to resolve.

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ENDNOTES

1 The example of the often-cited «Neem Tree Case» makes the perspective and the consequences of issuing patents comprehensible. For centuries, peasants in India have reproduced the seeds of the Neem tree and planted them in their fields. The tree has an antitoxic and insect-repellent effect that is harmless to other plants. But the plant is also used as building material, fodder, etc. If W.R. Grace and Company, a multinational chemicals corporation, could have patented the plant in 1985, the plant would have been restricted to a single use, thus triggering a whole chain of massive problems.

2 The meeting of EU ministers of education in 1999 in Bologna decided on new European standards for higher education and demanded «more effective» courses of study at universities. The background of this change is the constitution of the European Union and the associated standardization of degrees, as well as the dominant role of learning processes in the differentiation of markets and global competition.

3 Private marketers have established themselves on the education market today. They sell learning and training units for all age-groups and all situations in life, ranging from computer-science courses and language travels, to esoteric seminars and creativity training. The demand for equal opportunities for all, as well as efforts – stemming from the reform movement – «to develop» the entire personality is replaced by an educational package that is customised to fit one's personal needs and can be completed in a short period of time, albeit only by those who can afford it.

4 Herbert Marcuse: «Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur» (1937), in: Schriften, vol. 3, Frankfurt/ M. 1979, pp. 186 - 226.

5 The current European educational policies promote the opposite, because they neither guarantee the knowledge required on the new flexible labour markets – it is instead privatized in often dubious advanced training offers – nor do they provide the time and resources needed to develop social and communicative abilities that today count as qualification. The knowledge-based economy «corrupts» life and social interaction in a parasitic way.

6 Irit Rogoff: «Engendering Terror», in: Ursula Biemann: Geografie und die Politik der Mobilität, Vienna 2002, p. 33.

7 The exhibition «If you lived here» was initiated and organized by the US American artist Martha Rosler. It can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of a socio-spatial artistic knowledge practice. The artist, who was dedicated in her works to the relationship between public and private, as well as to representation and representability, examined in this exhibition processes of gentrification and homelessness. The gallery was located in a part of Manhattan in which an upgrading of the neighborhood was accompanied by massive expulsion. The project addressed the neighborhood itself and sought to intervene locally in a social process by means of an exhibition. The audience was also assigned a new role, as it was also involved in this process in various events, either as the new middle-class trying to move into this neighborhood, or as artists who still had a studio there and had to respond to the social conflicts. Rosler used the gallery not to produce representations of homelessness, but opened the space for selfhelp groups, critical urban planners, and art projects that explicitly intervened in the politics and production of homelessness.

8 Cf. projects like Kunstraum Lüneburg, «critical studies» at the Malmö Art Academy, the project department D/O/C/K at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig, or also the Institut für Theorie der Gestaltung und Kunst (ith) in Zurich. It is certainly not by chance that activities that conceive research and art production together are starting to establish themselves especially at art academies.

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