

## **Visioning Ourselves as Social Epistemologists** **Mel Orozco, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México**

In 2012, the journal *Social Epistemology* celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The occasion brought about both interesting reviews of the short history of social epistemology, and remarks on the future development of its theory, topics, and, agenda (Collin 2014, Gómez 2014, Orozco 2014). Now, a more wide-ranging community pursues social epistemology — a community that gave rise to the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC). The diverse contributions to SERRC have opened possibilities for a different understanding of the future of social epistemology. Despite many SERRC members coming from programs related to philosophy of science, science studies, and sociology, the vision expressed on this site reflects who we want to become — taking social epistemology as part of our major interest — even if we are academically engaged with other fields that focus on the same topics of knowledge, society and culture. Social epistemology asks us to address these topics normatively either by generating empirical approaches, or by adding new elements to present debates.

Expressing concerns related to contemporary science and technology, which have directed us to take a stand on social epistemology, seems easier than making statements about how social epistemology could lend better philosophical positions to contemporary debates regarding knowledge production and distribution. Still, the question remains — what contributions can a social epistemologist make? A common expectation suggests that contributions by SERRC might yield not only visions of how we understand science production, but also how we can combine our visions by different means (e.g. media, talks, books, articles) to reach other members of society and integrate them into decisions about the roles we want science to play in our lives. Interesting connections exist that combine social epistemology with the exercise of “visioning the future” beyond the typical cases that one would see in cutting edge projects (Whitaker 2014).

Something new seems to be happening in the way social epistemology is being read, interpreted and discussed. In dealing with how we can approach this program, the idea of visioning the future (Cabrera 2013) has proved to be a launch pad from which we can advance what we see currently in our different projects. Visioning also shows how these projects are connected to the social epistemology literature over the last 25 years and makes it easier to take the first steps in this developing field. Furthermore, in comparison with the initial moments of SERRC, I would dare say that this idea represents an important framework in which we can pose the question of how the pursuit of knowledge should be organized in different locations.

From my perspective, the increasing number of members in SERRC generates additional urgency regarding the questions: What is social epistemology? How does Steve Fuller’s program fit within SERRC? Even if those questions have yet to be addressed directly as part of our vision statements, we can see social epistemology going beyond its initial frontiers from what was, a few years ago, a rather abstract philosophical approach to knowledge in just a few circles, to a more encompassing discussion attracting people from different disciplines. This occurrence does not mean that SERRC has only grown in the sheer number of people with varied backgrounds. The most important result has been,

in addition to SERRC contributions, seeing how this subtle experiment, at the base level, is an exercise in exploring the kinds of goals we set forth when doing actually social epistemology. Departing from vague notions of what social epistemology is, or just taking for granted that social epistemology defines correctly the social basis of knowledge (regardless of your position), the most critical question remains: What do we want to do as future social epistemologists?

Often, when writing about social epistemology, we elude this question by focusing on the challenges that interfere with our vision, or by emphasizing the ways social epistemology already presents itself. I think these eluding strategies are normal since we are still in the beginning stages of this field. But they are also difficult because social epistemology, at present, is being developed in programs that are not friendly to it. We take for granted that we are not learning how the field is organized, and where it goes, by taking courses, or by participating in research with other colleagues that have dedicated their efforts particularly to understanding how the pursuit of knowledge needs to be organized so that its social character remains expansive.

This state of affairs makes it difficult to answer what we want to accomplish by getting into social epistemology. The most frustrating part of this question is that as the field takes its deserved place in universities one must deal regularly with people who have heard about social epistemology, and who express interest in the discussions, but who think that the only the version of social epistemology comes only out of the analytic tradition. They fail to see the connections to the general program of Fuller's social epistemology! However, we need to keep in mind that the emergence of this new interdisciplinary project, in any existing version, was not friendly to existing approaches to knowledge. Fuller's version, in particular, did not develop exactly in opposition to all the objectives that one finds, for instance, in Science Studies. Rather, the idea of filling the gaps between philosophy and sociology requires that we take a different stand from what we find recently in both disciplines.

When initially presenting his approach to social epistemology, Fuller offered a vision of a social epistemologist as a policymaker who could articulate the fieldwork of a social scientist with that of a philosopher. Apparently, Fuller had in mind a role — in which one could continue learning about different issues necessary to organize the pursuit of knowledge and prove one's own ideas — as an advisor in institutions that promote social change (Fuller 2002, 251). Later, in *The Intellectual* (2005), Fuller combined this idea with his four theses on intellectuals. From there, two options opened up and were reinforced elsewhere (Fuller 2009): 1) That those who could address audiences and speak truth to power needed protection, such as tenured position, in which, although there are few incentives to address diverse publics, fits within the activities in academia; 2) That in these neo-liberal times the functions of research and teaching have split installing a dynamic that threatens the future of everyone — that of tenured professors who are condemned to publishing and patenting, that of students whose expectations of getting a diploma are related to their eligibility for future employment, and that of society, at large, ending up captive to visions that, in most of the cases, are indifferent to the needs of its members.

Having worked for almost ten years in academia in Mexico, I think the fact that social epistemology, Fuller's version in particular, is not yet part of a formal program — which might stop its creative drive and quest for a vision — should be valued as a positive sign. However, we still need to learn how to increase our interactions to make our vision plausible and inspiring to others. Even though Fuller has written for specific audiences, in a recent interview (2014), he underlined that although social epistemology is a philosophical program, it should not be constricted to the domain of philosophy. On the contrary, social epistemology looks forward to reaching academics and non-academics that share a concern for the normative disposition of humanity (Fuller 2014, 152). This position suggests the possibility of practicing social epistemology as engaged with the particular context we are creating and its success depends, in large measure, on what we add to our vision. We are visioneering our own future. The uncertainties arising with visioneering should be easier to overcome in this exercise of asking and answering where we want to take social epistemology.

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