

Social Epistemology As Work: A Quest for Normativity at the University
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For me, social epistemology is concrete and material. We can touch it, we can walk on it, we talk about it, and we produce it through acts of labour. Yet, as I will argue in this piece, labour has gone a bit missing in social epistemology and should move to the forefront.

As Steve Fuller set out in *Social Epistemology* in 1988, a key question concerns how the pursuit of knowledge should be organised. The underlying thesis is that the production of knowledge is a normative endeavour. Politics, collectively, is everywhere. This perspective has been disputed as Science and Technology Studies (STS), of the kind associated with Bruno Latour, opts for a non-normative approach to knowledge production. In a 2002 debate at the University of Hong Kong, Latour and Fuller addressed, in part, issues concerning descriptive and normative approaches in STS (Barron 2003).

Social Epistemology's Gaze at Itself

Even within social epistemology, the call for normativity regarding knowledge production does not always translate into tangible, political realities. As my work centers on the university and the social sciences as sites of knowledge production in a neoliberal world, I would like to shed a bit more light on the question of social epistemology's dedication to politics on the ground by focusing on the university as a workplace and as a site of neo-liberalism. Are social epistemologists really political? Do we engage with the materiality of what knowledge production is about?

To gaze at ourselves, let's turn to Alvin Gouldner's work on reflexivity in the social sciences. In *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, Gouldner analyses the intertwining of social theory and practice with the political surroundings at the time in the 1960s and 1970s. Gouldner suggests, like C. Wright Mills, that being a sociologist is a life-encompassing activity that cannot be discarded at the doors of a university. In so doing, Gouldner presents his social epistemology membership card. The process of becoming aware of ourselves, in the totality of our relations to our research and the outside world, is at the core of Gouldner's reflexive sociology program. What makes his work so distinctive is that it is an epistemological position with practical and political implications. For Gouldner, critique can never be a static undertaking and needs to be continually revisited — as he showed in his work about the growing convergence between functionalism and Marxism. Being a Marxist himself, Gouldner accused Marxist sociologists of being in a static relationship with their theory, of not living up to their strong theoretical claims of critique and not questioning the foundations of their thought. In fact, Gouldner saw open-mindedness to hostile information as a strategy that prevented us from getting lost in dogmatic thought. Gouldner can be seen as a true social epistemologist.

Undoubtedly, social epistemology has high regard for open-mindedness to hostile information. However, I am less sure about its real commitment in conceptual terms —

speaking of social epistemology as a collective — to politics within the university on a global scale and against the prevalent conditions of knowledge production within higher education. Academic capitalism is everywhere (Münch 2011). At the heart of the transformation of the university is a transformation of its labour relations and, as a consequence, a transformation of the kinds of knowledge that we produce (Roggero 2011).

My general concern is not that social epistemology’s normativity with regard to these quests was absent. Yet, a tendency exists in the social sciences and humanities — and this tendency also applies to this collective — to not name things or to disguise their materiality by choosing alternative labels. Labeling has a performative effect. The labeling of things becomes part of the materiality of an object. ‘Social practices’ and ‘producing the social’ have become current buzzwords (Ariztía, 2012, Camic et al. 2011). As I argued elsewhere (2014), as important as the latest ‘turn to practice’ is to study the production of the social sciences, it seems to systematically leave aside one dimension that is crucial in the shaping of practices both in the social sciences and in the sciences — the labour relations of academic knowledge production.

Of course, there are exceptions. To take an example from the SERRC, our colleague Stephen Norrie enriched the debate on academic work by providing us with creative approaches (2011) on how to form an academic collective in spite of institutional pressure to publish individually in top-tier journals, constraints that are especially prevalent for early career academics in precarious working conditions.

What we do in this collective is, in some way, an act of resistance. One might argue that taking the time to write a short piece here and, so, having less time to write for a top-tier journal could be considered, given current pressures for research output, a postmodern act of solidarity — albeit in disguised ways. However, naming and labeling — talking about academic work — is the first step. Perhaps every now and again it is necessary to think and act beyond the neoliberal university.

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