

# MAPPING THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY BACK INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

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One of the little-appreciated, but nonetheless vital, functions that research into higher education performs from time to time is the historiographical counterpart of ‘backward mapping’, a concept developed more than 20 years ago by the Harvard policy analyst, Richard Elmore. Elmore’s concern lay primarily with the coordination of, and interaction between, policy procedures, and very especially with mapping the different stages of definition, operationalization, implementation and outcome of policy. Proceeding backwards, he began with the end impact sought and defined the preceding stages in light of what could reasonably be achieved in the stage that followed. Such an approach may also be extended by analogy to policy constructs. In this latter setting, ‘backward mapping’ consists in seeing how far theory and hypotheses built around a central concept – in this case the Knowledge Society – possess explanatory power and, more to the point, how the felicitous notion has emerged over time and what factors have contributed to its emergence. Within this latter and broader-ranging perspective, ‘backward mapping’ involves embedding a specific construct which itself has grown out of developments, some external, others internal, into a particular framework – in this case, the higher education systems of the world. An alternative perspective, which in effect amounts largely to the same thing, involves the transfer or extension of a given construct or concept, honed, operationalized and elaborated in one domain, to another. The ‘Knowledge Society’ is itself precisely such a construct.

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## SUBTLITIES AND COMPLEXITIES OF THE TASK

Such ‘backward mapping’ of the Knowledge Society onto higher education is both subtle and complex. It is subtle because from one point of view it is a synthesis and summation of developments across multiple domains – some disciplinary in nature, others cross- and multi-disciplinary – which have served to give us intellectual purchase over the complexities of higher education. These domains, like Legion, are many. Already more than a decade ago, those contributing directly to the study of higher education were estimated at more than 20 (Becher, 1992). And to judge from the titles of new scholarly journals that have emerged in the meantime, this number is growing. ‘Quality studies’, ‘evaluation studies’ and ‘international cooperation’ are as good examples as ever of the intellectual creativity and liveliness that characterize the general, overall field of the study of higher education.

The process of ‘backward mapping’ is complex because the very use of this conceptual focus also serves to alter our understanding and perception of the functions, processes, purpose and, for that matter, place of higher education as it assimilates new functions and purposes within the Knowledge Society. Thus, the change in the mental boundaries brought about by the Knowledge Society, as an expression of synthesis, acts in turn to re-shape our perception – and very often, our vocabulary – of the basic functions the institution performs.

Nor does complexity cease there. For though the Knowledge Society may serve terminologically as a common point of exchange, dialogue and concentration shared across different discipline-related fields, each field tends naturally to interpret the central construct within its own conceptual frameworks, boundaries, paradigms, operational criteria and specific vocabularies. Thus what earlier appeared, and very often was represented by its earlier proponents, as a solid intellectual edifice begins to reveal – if it did not at first sight always admit – a variety, a diversity of approach and differences in fundamental interpretation that would honour the Tower of Babel. Yet dialogue and indeed scholarly exchange do not necessarily require a common vocabulary, though they may sometimes benefit from it. On the contrary, a strong case can very easily be sustained for not having a common, single over-riding perspective on the grounds that the most valuable aspects of exchange lie precisely in the variations in presentation, the lines of argument each pursued within their own setting and disciplinary frame. Indeed, without the heterodoxy that accompanies exchange

across different disciplines and intellectual paradigms, the creative spark kindled by comparing alternative and conflicting narratives risks all too often being quickly smothered under a convenient and tidy orthodoxy, as both Bhabha and Weiler remind us.

## THE OCCASION

‘Research and Higher Education Policy – Knowledge, Access and Governance: Strategies for Change’ provided the focus of the second Colloquium of the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge. It was held on 1–3 December 2004, at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. The Colloquium forms part of a multi-annual activity undertaken through the Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge, supported by UNESCO in partnership with the Swedish International Development Agency; it marks a second stage in the ongoing discussion by scholars of higher education worldwide of the major issues currently shaping, and in the immediate future likely to shape, higher education and which, on that account, are considered central in defining a research agenda. The Colloquium was in effect a further step in exploring the dimensions and dynamic beneath the ‘knowledge nexus’; the first took place in December 2003, during the Global Research Seminar when attention focused on the Knowledge Economy and its implications for higher education.

The presentations in this volume fall into three parts. The first part is constructed around the Keynote Addresses, and includes certain shorter interventions that commented upon them. The second part consists of Chapters chosen from the three themes that provided the focus for discussion, namely Knowledge, Governance and Access, and very particularly those which both took up Keynote Address themes and featured broad geographical coverage in keeping with the Forum’s global nature. This second part of the book is built on grounded case studies which on the one hand provide more elaborate treatment, within specific cultural and political settings, of issues identified by lead speakers. On the other, they move in on the themes of Knowledge, Governance and Access and develop them both in greater detail and on a cross-national basis. The third part of the book contains the Closing Keynote by Steve Fuller, ‘Universities and the Future of Knowledge Governance from the Standpoint of Social Epistemology’.

## AREAS OF DISCOMFORT

What stands out above all in the first and last parts of this dissection of the Knowledge Society – though it also permeates the grounded case studies – is surely the deep dissatisfaction at current attempts to represent the Knowledge Society in ideal, schematic if not outright ideological terms. Is ‘Globalization’ as its central construct in truth a ‘new start’? Is the seeming straightforward binary division of nations and cultures along the lines of ‘global’ versus ‘local’ plausible, or for that matter grounded in any reality? Does it in any manner advance our understanding of the nuances that political, cultural or social development force upon the arbitrary oversimplifying of economic schematics and models? Is our understanding of the changes in the human condition that globalization has brought about, and which in its social dimension are contained in the Knowledge Society, served – let alone advanced – by the rush to render human behaviour in the deceptively simple (and thus greatly appealing) drive towards quantifying the condition of humankind, peoples and nations? Even if such an economic doxology may provide solace to some, it is, as Bhabha gently points out, no great help to those who live in a world where the individual’s perceptions of that world are still overwhelmingly shaped by communities, identities and imaginations. However new and ordered and apparently simplified by the application of a ‘global overlay’, or by the centrality of knowledge in presenting the Global in terms of sweeping homogenization, society continues to be shaped by historical contingency.

## DISTURBING PRECEDENTS

This theme is taken further by Houtondji and by Weiler. For Houtondji, what passes for today’s edition of the Knowledge Society builds upon a far earlier version of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’: that of an Imperial heartland defining, framing and thus controlling what constituted ‘valued’ knowledge (held to be universal), and a colonial periphery, which furnished the ‘material’ but not the paradigmatic frame for organizing and classifying the knowledge thus built up into formal cognate fields. The ‘closeness of fit’ between the contemporary Knowledge Society and its industrial and colonial predecessor has an uncomfortable resonance, which may lead some to agree with the epigram of the mid-19th Century French journalist, Alphonse Kahr, that *‘plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’*.

The parallel between knowledge production in the industrial-colonial world of a recent yesteryear and its post-industrial successor reminds us that however appealing the potential of the Knowledge Society to act as a ‘level playing field’, the reality is very different. Houtondji reminds us that the self-same process by which knowledge held to be universal is forged, quite apart from the institutional and organizational settings in which that forging takes place, is also a process that, once account is taken of different levels of development, marginalizes – ostracizes even – other indigenous or alternative ‘knowledge traditions’. This is no small form of expropriation, and no little exclusion. Assimilating, ostracizing or forcing alternative traditions of local knowledge into ‘inner exile’ effectively evacuates meaning and value from the very social structures and communities that produce them. Expropriating ‘local knowledge’ in turn undermines that basic common enterprise – the creation of a particular knowledge tradition – that affords meaning and identity to particular societies and to non- or pre-industrial ones in particular.

There are, however, indications that despite assimilation into Western canons of knowledge, a revitalization of local identities through ‘literary re-appropriation’ is well under way. This theme is taken further by Ghemisola A. Adeoti, in his Chapter in Part Two on literary studies in Nigerian universities.

## **THE INHUMAN TIDINESS OF A BINARY WORLD**

Creating the ‘periphery’ in the Knowledge Society is thus largely a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Knowledge Society is to be a ‘level playing field’, which is a prophetic claim rather than an observed fact, this in no way alters the present topography. If there is somewhere a ‘level playing field’ in which each individual, community or nation may compete on equal terms with its neighbours – a decidedly Hobbesian notion – it is at present surrounded by high mountains and deep crevasses, both in its formal knowledge infrastructure and in terms of those having access to it; this is a point Karuna Chanana develops in connection with the participation and subject choice of women in India’s system of higher education; disparities such as these vary as much within nations as they do between them. Even if one does not contest the generous shape of things to come in the Knowledge Society of the future, the issue does not lie there: it lies very certainly in how to move from what is to what ought to be.

The Knowledge Society is very far from being utterly and wholly coterminous with the production, exchange and transformation of ideas, images and services of a saleable nature. Nevertheless this *reductio ad pecuniam* furnishes a powerful rhetoric behind the creation of 'alternative providers', which Carmen García Guadilla describes in detail in her Chapter on the Knowledge Society as it is emerging in Latin America. Agreed, knowledge permeates ideas, images and services; it shapes the way they are presented; it seeks to enforce their acceptability. But such a limited vision is precisely that. It is limited – a species of tunnel vision, a partial and very incomplete surrogate which affords overweening importance to those tradable aspects that may make the fortune of individuals, firms or even for a time whole peoples, trading in the image of their past excellence and present achievements. In the marketization of knowledge what tends to be forgotten is that knowledge is not confined to those dimensions which permit revenue-generation for establishments of higher education, any more than the species of knowledge and belief that brought the Vatican into being should be subject to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Services, on the grounds that Sacred Knowledge is not only a cultural good but also confers immeasurable spiritual well-being – and enduring value added – for its 'end users'!

## **ORTHODOXY CHALLENGED AND THE PROBLEMATIC REVEALED**

Weiler's challenge to the orthodoxies of knowledge has little time – and rightly so – for the blinkers that more routine accounts have placed upon defining the Knowledge Society. The Knowledge Society is itself the outcome of profound changes in the nature of knowledge, and Weiler's Chapter takes us to the heart of the matter by exploring three fundamental aspects he describes as 'deficits' in the current representation and depiction of the Knowledge Society. Certainly, the three deficits may be seen as the 'takens for granted' that lie behind certain contemporary analyses. They are, however, far more than that. Once one moves beyond the bounds of quantification and brings broader perspectives to bear on the evolving Knowledge Society, so the 'takens for granted' change in nature: they become fundamentally problematic. As such, they bid fair to make the appealing notion less coherent – and certainly less tidy – than many would wish. What is knowledge? What are the political consequences of its production and use? Who determines what knowledge is 'valued'? Here we enter

into the politics of knowledge, and the interests that ease their agenda forward within them. Finally, having explored these dimensions of epistemic change, Weiler returns them to higher education by posing the question, 'What are the structural changes that follow for higher education from recognizing both the political and epistemic shift in the contemporary culture of knowledge?'

By bringing back both politics and epistemology as basic points of departure in re-analyzing the implications of the Knowledge Society for higher education, a far broader series of questions becomes imperative. Whose interests are served by redefining 'valued' knowledge? How are such particular interests forwarded? What are the consequences of their execution? The Knowledge Society thus begins to yield up its status as an acquired construct or as a process whose inevitability is unchallenged. It becomes, on the contrary, an area of debate and uncertainty, the progress of which is perceived through a glass darkly as opposed to clearly through an economic model.

Samoff and Carrol move further down this very road in their examination of the role of The World Bank, as a prime architect of valuating certain types of knowledge and ensuring its institutional embedding through the funding the Bank provides (in this case, to higher education in Africa). Paradoxically, once an epistemological perspective is applied to World Bank policy the Bank itself can no longer remain in its official and pristine role as a funding agency. It assumes an additional dimension, which may be interpreted as an 'agency for defining knowledge valued for its developmental potential'. The Bank's role is itself designated as being – literally – a prime stakeholder, whose interests are met by assigning priority to particular forms of knowledge and to the policy instruments that sustain them. The impact such priorities have in Africa, and more indirectly in India, are followed up in the Chapters by Ishengoma and Tilak respectively.

## **THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY: DISCOURSE AND DISSECTION**

There is, however, another constant theme that binds together many of the contributions to this book. It is the dissection of the discourse and policies which are vehiculated by that particular form of the Knowledge Society. Dissecting the policy, the institutions and the interests that seek to shelter beneath their imposed discourse stands therefore as another leitmotif in this series of essays. It is an important exercise, if only for the fact that the shaping of the Knowledge Society has sired its own vocabulary.

How discourse is shaped, and by which interests, is a theme pursued by different authors who tackle this central issue from widely different disciplinary perspectives. Houtondji dissects it through a historiography of the anthropology and ethnic studies created by Western scholars to describe the development of non-Western societies. Adeoti, by contrast, examines the role of discourse from within the world of Nigerian literature as it struggles to find an authentic voice for self-expression independently from the canon of English literature. A similar variation upon this theme is taken up by Samoff and Carrol, who chart the elaboration of the discourse that shapes the Knowledge Society within the framework of one institution – The World Bank – and its changes in priority as well as in terminology, which made for acceptability of the policies thus developed.

Different though these accounts are, nevertheless they provide clear examples of the way meaning may be reclaimed by, and re-set in, those societies on which externally conceived, disseminated and elaborated species of discourse have been imposed. The discourse, once universal, is re-defined from within. It is – to revert to Houtondji's striking turn – re-appropriated. Through re-appropriation the values, social constructs and cultural variety that universal categories so subtly deny are revived to add further nuance to the once dominant terminology. The implications of this are clear for all to see: the process of modifying the universal discourse as it applies to literature and to anthropology may just as well be extended to the re-emergence of 'universalism' on the wings of the Knowledge Society.

Clearly, what bonds these scholars is not simply how discourse is shaped and formed – which, as both Weiler on the one hand and Samoff and Carrol on the other both point out, amounts to but another of the many faces of Power and Authority. Examining the hidden assumptions beneath a given discourse – and that which has coalesced around the Knowledge Society no less so – is an essential part of understanding the Knowledge Society beyond the terms it has of itself, and beyond the accounts which those who advance homogeneity and convergence would wish us to accept.

## **SUSPENSION OF BELIEF AND THE DISCOURSE OF DISSENT**

In short, the other major theme that cuts across these essays is an attack on the narrative of orthodoxy and the orthodox narrative. To do so, of course, demands the suspension of belief in such a narrative. Such

a suspension of faith, the refusal to accept views that urge acceptance rather than debate – or for that matter the policies they seek to uphold – is an elemental and necessary act at the heart of scholarship. Examining how the orthodox narrative has developed, the circumstances that accompany its dissemination and the interests that lie behind it is also to challenge the largely un-admitted – and very probably, inadmissible – assumptions that underlie it. Thus, out of the discourse laid down by Power and Authority emerges its counterpoint, that of Dissent.

In this volume, the discourse of Dissent ends with what some may see as a tribute to the immortal memory of Ambrose Bierce, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American wit and author of the *Devil's Dictionary*. Indeed, it is not greatly exaggerated to see Fuller's essay as perhaps the first bold step towards the Knowledge Society's very own 'Devil's Dictionary'. This he does by dint of an insightful and devastating anatomy of some of the more self-indulgent, and often opaque, jargon that accompanies the rise of the Knowledge Society as a social and economic construct.

The feline phrase has, of course, long been with us. And its modern-day technocratic counterpart – the contemporary edition of the feline phrase – like its predecessor has a very special and invidious strength. It has an outward and comforting blandness that camouflages a situation, a process or a condition which, when expressed nakedly and put back into the plain speaking that Everyman employs and understands, suddenly exposes a reality so unsavoury that even those of a minimal sensitivity to equity, decency and fairness are hard put not to recoil in astonishment and dismay. Thus, as Fuller himself points out, does social epistemology serve to give us greater and immediate purchase over a world the complexity of which we are told is graspable only with difficulty. We are also told that those who cannot grasp so puzzling a state of affairs should have confidence in those who can – usually the very same Master Word-Smiths of the ambiguous phrase. If the truth were out, social epistemology remains the trusty servant to an ancient and much-valued purpose: the ripping aside of double talk and exposing the richness of humbug that lies just beneath the surface of the careful craft of techno-speak. That social epistemology should have to come to our rescue at a time when Authority, for the past decade at least, has clamoured for higher education to fall in with accountability, transparency and responsiveness must surely be one of the more delicious ironies of the hour.

## THE WORLD OUTSIDE

Whilst most of the contributions to this book turn around mapping the Knowledge Society back into higher education, there are some that move in a contrary direction. Anna María Cetto for instance pays close attention to the knowledge that lies outside the university. She calls for science within the groves of Academe to draw up a new social contract with society, and to explore new ways of recognizing and fulfilling the changing expectations society has of science and its applications. Saleem Badat also swims in counter-current; his concern is the appropriateness of academic knowledge to policy-making. Badat examines the different genres of research and writing undertaken by scholars in higher education, and more to the point how certain key issues in the national policy arena may pose difficulties when related to the autonomy of intellectual work.

Knowledge, Governance and Access have been constant preoccupations to the world of government, to the three Estates of higher education – the Academic, Administrative and Student Estates – and to society these three decades past. They figure amongst the pressing concerns of society, and thus amongst the abiding preoccupations of those who must recognize and meet society's expectations of its universities. As enduring and essential strategic concerns, these three issues may indeed be aggregated and brought together within the all-embracing overview of the Knowledge Society. Indeed, the capacity of individual systems and institutions of higher education to make the transition depends on adaptation within these three spheres. Yet if there is one conclusion to emerge from these studies, it is that we are only starting to identify the operational issues for higher education that the Knowledge Society brings forward; these deserve to be pursued further on a cross-national, multi-level and multi-disciplinary basis.

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## REFERENCES

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