

## **EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRONTIER CRISS-CROSSINGS**

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### **Summary**

The rise of disciplinary knowledge appears connected to the emergence of the so called organic society characterized by a unification-through-differentiation of its particles. This long-term process spawned not just the nation-state as an exemplary form of organic society but the modern university as well. The latter was established in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the fundamental division between research and education or proper and applied science. The former was considered to be able governing itself whereas the second was supposed to be governed by the former. First philosophy and thereafter literature were promoted into being the privileged self-governing agent authorized for the unification of the growingly dismembered body of knowledge. Accordingly, F. R. Leavis tried to establish the pre-eminence of English literature over other disciplines whose point of liaison it was expected to make. However, as it was ultimately made to serve the function of consolidating the national elite, the idea of English was subsequently challenged by the gradual establishment of the more broadly envisioned Comparative Literature. Unfortunately neither Comparative Literature, having had surreptitiously celebrated the exceptionalism of Western culture, was able to avoid the eliminations typical of the self-governing idea of history. Toward the end of the 1960s the project of Cultural Studies was academically established in order to take up what disciplinary expertise had hitherto scornfully dismissed. In aligning with subordinated and marginalized cultures outside the academia, it expropriated established disciplines in the name of this totality claiming superiority over their restricted identity. As the claim of academic knowledge to superiority thus stubbornly returns, this points to the conclusion that the frontier between knowledge and its other is incessantly redrawn but hardly ever removed. It seems to endure as the zone of continuous conflicts, contestations and negotiations.

## 1. The rise of disciplinary knowledge: setting epistemological frontiers

However this may appear strange nowadays, knowledge has not always been a goal-oriented institutional realm of activity. Far from representing a single-minded pursuit of truth or a committed problem-solving activity, sciences were until approximately the second quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century just casually taken up in the course of doing other things, such as enjoying leisure or chasing profit. They had been practiced in diverse social settings, mostly outside the university. The scientist, meaning a full-time practitioner of the natural sciences, entered English usage not earlier than 1833.

However, according to the French intellectual historian Michel Foucault, the rise of disciplinary knowledge can be appropriately explained only out of the emergence of the so-called disciplinary society in various Western countries over the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During that time discipline gradually became a formula of populace governing. It was based on the meticulous control of the operations of the body, consistent subjection of its forces and unremitting surveillance of its activities. The more obedient the body was made, the more useful it became, and vice-versa. Coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination. The political-economic investment of the body, rendered by Foucault as the “micro-physics of power”, had since the 17<sup>th</sup> century constantly reached out to ever broader domains, as if they tended to cover the entire social body. Step by step, not just the workshop, but the school and the army as well were subjected to meticulous control. In referring various individual activities to the social whole that at once functions as a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle to be followed, the entire social body was turned into a kind of factory.

In sum, Foucault puts forth the thesis that the transformation of the university was just a constitutive part of this global process. A new type of university was for the first time clearly announced toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the prominent German philosopher Immanuel Kant decided to intervene into the debate on the hierarchy of university disciplines. His influential treatise *The Conflict of Faculties* is nowadays usually regarded to be the blueprint for the modern university as it foresaw the forms and ends of this institution well before it was officially established. Significantly enough, Kant sets out by stating an analogy between the idea of the university, promoted at that time under the pressure of the necessity of the mass production of knowledge, and the division of labor in a factory. He regards the form of the university in its relation to the larger “organism” of an emergent society which precisely at that time underwent the transition from the monarchy to a republican constitution. Along with the necessary differentiation of discrete domains, both society and university were striving after a unifying principle that would ensure the commensurability of divergent particles. Connecting the idea of university to the state as a whole, therefore, Kant claims that each member of the state “should have his position and function defined by the idea of the whole”.

Elaborating upon the same “organic” idea, Kant’s contemporary Johann Gottfried von Herder simultaneously coined the myth of a unified German *Kultur* in order to assimilate differences in regional dialects and cultural values into the mainstream of a mother tongue and a national history. As he states in the treatise *Reflections on the*

*Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-1791), man is essentially indebted to antecedent natural stages of his evolution, but he is so only in the sense in which an end is indebted to its means. Therefore, although Herder admits that in the process of the racial differentiation of mankind each race plays a necessary historical role, he insists that the European has the privilege of constituting the final point of development. As opposed to all other races, who serve just as signposts within evolution, only the European has an independent historical consciousness. That is to say, the European alone is capable of development, whereas the other races are determined by their natural environment. Following this thread along with some ideas put forth by his great contemporary Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the prominent Romanticist writer Friedrich Schlegel was as Kant's and Herder's descendent already faced with the necessity to take into cognizance the heterogeneous profile of various national particles of the European body. As a consequence, he proposes in his *History of European Literature* (1803/04) to regard only modern German literature as the logical and most complete outcome of European culture, while to treat other great European literatures as its historically outdated but necessary preparatory phases.

Hence although at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany the proper nation-state was certainly yet to come, it was nonetheless recognizably enough outlined to form an appropriate setting for the emergence of the Humboldtian type of university. Soon after this university was introduced, another stately pattern was discovered to additionally underpin its model of progression aimed at unification. Namely, the political economist Friedrich List instructed the German principalities using the example set by the United States, a newly established confederation of former colonies that were swiftly constituted into a single-minded republic. Implementing over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a combination of disciplinary policies of economic, cultural, educational and colonial provenance in order to establish a powerful nation-state, Germany was the first country to constitute itself after the “organic” model.

Considering this, it hardly comes as a surprise that the West owes the most influential idea of the modern university exactly to German thinkers who seem to have united their intellectual efforts to achieve their expectedly common goal. There is a clear continuity to be traced. To start with, when the Humboldtian type of university had been stately established in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was based on the fundamental division between research (*Wissenschaft*) and education (*Bildung*). But this division on its part merely reintroduces “within the walls” of the university Kant's initial distinction between the university itself and those outside it rendered as “incompetent people”. Kant regarded as “incompetent” all those who were incapable of self-reflection and governed by the other. He attributes such regrettable unaccountability (*Unmündigkeit*), used by Herder to mark the non-European races and by Friedrich Schelling to devalue the non-German European literatures, not only externally to the “populace which consists of idiots” but also internally to the “technicians of learning”. These *Fachidiots* only apply given knowledge, like the scientists-practitioners who serve the government, instead of searching for the truth beyond knowledge like philosophers who serve reason.

Kant's sharp distinction between *proper* and *applied* science anticipates the lower status that will be given to education in comparison with research in the framework of the Humboldtian model. Although Humboldt himself had initially imagined the educational

process as a necessary test of scientific research and the students themselves as active inquirers in their own right, this interdependency was quickly discarded. Teaching was gradually subsumed under research in order to replace the “regressive” dialogue with students with the “progressive” dialogue with colleagues. A virtual and self-propelling community of scientific researchers was thus established, well separated from the lecture halls where students are encountered en masse. Instead of bringing the students to intellectual maturity, science was expected to keep its leaders in the permanent process of self-transformation. Hence the public instruction of the people was progressively neglected in favor of the formation of an exemplary academic subject capable of freely moving among the increasingly differentiated spheres of human society. In being an obvious inheritor of Kant’s self-reflective philosopher, this accountable subject was elected to represent his enlightened conviction concerning the capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advancement toward what is better. The remaining unaccountable multitude of subjects, on the other side, was supposed to supply the necessary ideological, economic or military means for this goal.

In this way the ability of self-governing was established as the key criterion for the forthcoming process of disciplinary normalization. Discipline was instantiated on the devaluation, exploitation and if necessary expulsion of those who were partially or completely incapable of self-disciplining. When, for example, in the second quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century William Whewell, an Anglican priest who held a chair in mineralogy, raised the imperative of systematic knowledge closely associated with philosophy, he was apparently subscribing to Kant’s watershed distinction between proper and applied science popularized in England by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Whewell emphasized the necessity of evaluating alleged discoveries made in particular fields, according to their deducibility from the larger body of common scientific knowledge. This knowledge, expected to channel the torrent of university activities in an edifying direction, was envisaged by him to be theory-driven. In order to represent such a “division of labor”, he used the figure of a major river assembling and leading its tributaries toward a future common goal.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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