

Theory and Practice: Dichotomies of Knowledge?

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There are different ways of dealing with the relationship between theory and practice. I am treating this relationship as a dichotomy of knowledge – asking, in other words, whether theory and practice correspond to distinctly different kinds of knowledge. The answer – this is, after all, a scholarly conference – is yes and no.

One of the conventional assumptions about the difference between “theory” and “practice” is that they represent, or require, different kinds of knowledge: “theory” traditionally represents a kind of knowledge that is the generalized distillation of observations for the purpose of explaining other observations; its principal purpose lies in the constant perfection of its own explanatory power. Theoretical knowledge is rated by how well it explains as wide a range of phenomena as possible.

“Practice”, by contrast, is conventionally predicated on a more instrumental conception of knowledge; it represents knowledge that helps to accomplish things, and that proves its worth by how well it does help to accomplish whatever needs to be accomplished, and therefore by how closely it corresponds to the particulars of a given problem situation.

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Practical knowledge, in other words, is particular, situational, and – in the language of the epistemologists – idiographic. Theoretical knowledge is general, abstract, nomothetic.

Maintaining that distinction, and keeping it relatively pure, has played a considerable role both in the progression of scientific thought and in keeping practice relatively unencumbered by overly complex and rigorous demands in the construction of its knowledge base. There has certainly been a good deal of borderline knowledge straddling the distinction between the two; there has also been a good deal of transfer from theoretical to practical knowledge, as in the many ways the theories of physics have informed the practical knowledge needs of the civil or the automotive engineer; while it is not unheard of that the experience of practice has stimulated, questioned, or enriched the progression of theoretical knowledge (as in the discovery of new pathologies by the medical profession and its influence on the biological sciences), the relationship has remained largely one way.

This little essay argues that, while the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge retains some of its conventional utility, it needs to be rethought against the background of some of the rather major changes in the concept of knowledge that has been such an important characteristic of the last 50 years. One of the results of these changes has been that the conventional dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge has eroded considerably and, even more importantly, that it has demonstrated its own limitations for the construction of an adequate conception of knowledge. In other words, I would argue that the emergence of a new concept of knowledge has both redefined and transcended the dichotomy of theoretical and practical knowledge, and that it has introduced other and at least equally important categories into our thinking about knowledge.

I would like to elaborate this point by referring to a number of developments that have had a direct impact on the appropriateness, the utility and the adequacy of the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. I do this by drawing on my own work on the politics of knowledge. From the humble beginnings of an Eggertsen Lecture at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES)² a long time ago, this work has germinated over a number of years, occasionally interrupted by the more pressing demands of the practice of knowledge production. Its most recent product is a paper I presented to the Unesco Forum on Knowledge, Higher Education and Research last December; the paper, and the full apparatus of bibliographical references, is available on my website³.

In the context of that work, I want to make four brief points.

1. One of the main breakthroughs in our recent thinking about knowledge is the recognition that, when we talk about knowledge, we talk about a profoundly political phenomenon – which means that there is a very intense web of relationships between knowledge and power. These relationships have produced a number of hierarchies in the world of knowledge – hierarchies of powerful and powerless knowledge, of prestigious and less prestigious institutions of knowledge production, of more or less influential purveyors of knowledge. It is equally important to understand that these relationships are relationships of reciprocal legitimation, where knowledge legitimates power and where existing power relations tend to legitimate the production and dissemination of certain kinds of knowledge.

With regard to the issue of the dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge, the politics of knowledge has also revealed a transnational division of

² Hans N. Weiler, The Political Dilemmas of Foreign Study, *Comparative Education Review* 28, 2 (May 1984), 168-179 (also in Elinor G. Barber, Philip G. Altbach, and Robert G. Myers (eds.), *Bridges to Knowledge: Foreign Students in Comparative Perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 184-195)

³ http://www.stanford.edu/~weiler/Unesco_Paper_124.pdf

labor such that there is a clear international hierarchy in the production of knowledge. The defining characteristic of that hierarchy is that the definition of theoretical agendas, or the power of interpreting the significance of knowledge, resides squarely in the knowledge institutions of the North. Against that background, the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge takes on a new and different kind of significance; the really dichotomy becomes whether or not a scholar, a student, a scholarly institution has access to, and control over, the process and the instruments of defining theoretical agendas (instruments such as means of publication, research funding, or the general conferral of scholarly prestige).

2. My second point has to do with a number of key discourses in the world of knowledge that not only demonstrate the intensely political nature of knowledge, but also show the obsolescence of, or at least the need to re-think the difference between theory and practice. The examples I use in my writing are the discourses of development, of gender, and of democracy. In each case, I believe one can show how new, critical theoretical discourses assume a tremendously practical significance: the theoretical discourse on new notions of development (Ashis Nandy, Rajni Kothari, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, Majid Rahnema, Vinay Lal, Zygmunt Bauman and others) is not only intimately connected with the new discourse on knowledge, but has also generated such eminently practical precepts as local, grassroots, self-directed or sustainable strategies for development.

Similarly (as Nelly Stromquist's masterful Eggertsen Lecture at this meeting has shown again), the discourse on gender has demonstrated a profoundly theoretical quality in the sense of mobilizing considerable power for explaining the various, open or less open, manifestations of gendered social and economic conditions. It has, at the same time, become the crystallizing and energizing element in the very practical strategies of the women's movement.

Lastly, the discourse on democracy has moved from a purely theoretical exercise to an important set of very practical orientations for participatory involvement in political and social decision-making. The very notion of grassroots or local knowledge (or what Michel Foucault has called “le savoir des gens”, the people’s knowledge) provides a very powerful tool, as Guy Gran has shown, for the democratic mobilization of rural people in the development process⁴. Ashis Nandy, incidentally, makes a very important point about the tenuous relationship between democracy and certain kinds of knowledge discourses: “As more and more areas of life are ‘scientized’ and taken out of the reach of participatory politics to be handed over to experts, the universities as the final depository of expertise have become a major global political actor of our times. In addition to their other tasks, they legitimize the ‘expertization’ of public affairs and the reign of the professionals.”⁵.

3. My third point is that, if the dichotomy of theoretical and practical knowledge once was important, the new concept of knowledge has meanwhile generated a number of new categories that have become at least as important in mapping and describing the world of knowledge. Let me give you two examples that have loomed large in the discussion of new conceptions of knowledge.

The first set of categories has emerged from Habermas’ original appeal⁶ for reconstituting a conception of knowledge that would not only recognize, as had increasingly become the case, cognitive knowledge, but aesthetic and normative knowledge as well, thus liberating the domains of both ethical justification and artistic expression from their stigma of being unscientific, and making them legitimate elements in a new system of knowledge. This development also takes account of the fact that the “cultural location“, and hence the normative

⁴ Guy Gran, Beyond African Famines: Whose Knowledge Matters? *Alternatives* 11, 2 (1986), pp. 275-296

⁵ Ashis Nandy, Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge and Dissenting Futures of the University, in Sohail Inayatullah and Jennifer Gidley (eds.), *The University in Transformation: Global Perspectives on the Futures of the University*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000, pp. 115-123; quote p. 116

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985, pp. 134-137

disposition, of the observer is a constitutive element in the process of knowledge creation and has a decisive impact on the results of this process – a conclusion that has found expression in the term “culturality of knowledge“.

A second distinction that has entered into this debate, with very significant consequences, has been that between explanation and understanding, where the work of Karl-Otto Apel⁷, Paul Roth⁸ and others has triggered such an intensive discussion. The gist of that debate is the realization that conventional models of scientific explanation are severely limited when it comes to social reality, and that our most sophisticated predictive models for such things as voting, consumption behavior or warfare have provided little protection against surprises, serendipity, unexpected outcomes or, even, banality. What is needed instead is a more encompassing concept of understanding that places alongside generalized patterns of observations the depth and richness of the unique or at least specific dynamics operating in a given social situation. Peter Winch gave us a stern warning on this potential fallacy already some decades ago: “The central concepts which belong to our understanding of social life are incompatible with concepts central to the activity of scientific prediction. When we speak of the possibility of scientific prediction of social developments..., we literally do not understand what we are saying”⁹.

4. My fourth and last point transports this discussion of theoretical and practical knowledge into the realm of institutional models and realities, and it reflects as much my own experience at this university as my current involvement in the reform of higher education in Europe. My point here is that there is something in the tradition of the professional school at American universities that provides an

⁷ Karl-Otto Apel, *Understanding and Explanation: A Transcendental-Pragmatic Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984

⁸ Paul A. Roth, *Meaning and Method in the Social Sciences: A Case for Methodological Pluralism*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1987

⁹ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, p.94

important opportunity for overcoming the dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Before you start painting me right away into the corner of the entrepreneurial university and all its sins, give me just a moment to explain. Because there is, in the better examples of American Schools of Law, Schools of Engineering, and Schools of Education, at least the potential for an institutional structure that greatly facilitates the bringing together of theoretical and practical issues, of academic and applied knowledge, of disciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns. That potential, I believe, is worth cultivating further into a culture of knowledge that transcends the rather tenacious academic status differentials between theory and practice. As someone who has spent most of his academic life, thanks to a joint appointment in Political Science and Education, both in an academic department and in a professional school, the genius of the latter – at least in as impressive an exemplar as Stanford's School of Education – is palpable. Where masters of their theoretical craft like Lee Cronbach, Hank Levin, Martin Carnoy and others are not afraid to apply their skills to the practice of education and educational policy, and where that kind of interaction with practice feeds back into the revitalization of theoretical discourses, there is considerable hope for a new and invigorating relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge.

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