

The politics of knowledge

Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat

Translated by Millay Hyatt

An expert assessment is first and foremost a complex assemblage, combining methods, postures, issues of awareness and specialty, concepts and analytical frameworks, but also reconnaissance reports and disqualifications. Accordingly, all expert knowledges have to be grasped on that scale, commensurate with the political and epistemic problems they raise. It is in fact the assemblage as such that becomes productive (of meaning and knowledge), beyond the simple association of facts or the mere intersection of discourses. What does this particular expertise-assemblage reveal and provoke? What kind of resistance or involvement does it generate? What does it show us or help us understand? What does it disqualify or silence? The way in which these different questions are addressed will frame what we will call a politics of knowledge, or better yet, a biopolitics of knowledge: a politics that engages and structures all of the components of an expert evaluation, taking all of its aspects into consideration. Equal attention is paid to all its dimensions: epistemic (the relationship to knowledge), epistemological (the ontology of the various knowledges), polemological (the social relations of knowledge), and methodological (the modes of existence of the various knowledges).

This article develops further a presentation I gave in May 2006 in Toni Negri's seminar "Multitude and Metropolis."¹

1. The epistemic unearthing of knowledges and their political application

Any experiment, whether it be artistic, social, political, or educational, implicates a number of knowledges: that of professionals (artists, architects, social workers, urban planners, sociologists, etc.) and that of militants, residents, workers, and other consumers. Some of this knowledge remains buried within the situation at hand and never becomes visible to the public. It is left uncultivated (which is not to say that it is passive or unproductive). Other knowledges are considered insufficiently conceptualized or formalized according to an epistemic hierarchy and thus disqualified. These knowledges are the victims of an intellectual racism propagated by the most celebrated knowledges, by those knowledges that have the greatest influence. But another politics of knowledge is possible, one that would see these different knowledges—knowledge acquired by experience or developed methodologically, ordinary or specialized knowledge—as interpellating each other and putting each other to the test. How can we shape the common space that inheres in every experiment and that engages all the various expert knowledges, inciting them to confront and challenge each other, to test and cooperate with each other? How can we prevent some of them from basing their status on the ruin or silencing of the others? It appears to be both possible and imperative to create another politics of knowledge that does not deconstruct and disqualify other ways of knowing but that, conversely, encourages the various knowledges to confront head-on all the objections they are liable to encounter from each other. Such a politics requires a two-fold strategy: a strategy of cooperation that contributes to an epistemic unearthing of buried knowledge (the multiplicity of everyday knowledge that is both incorporated and encapsulated in action) and a strategy of alliance that allows for the political application of disqualified knowledges (the intellectual multitude of knowledges without a stake in anything).² Such a politics thus

1 The seminar was organized by **Toni Negri, Anne Querrien, Carlo Vercellone, Michèle Collin, Patrick Dieuaide, Pantaleo Elicio,** and **Thierry Baudouin**. The papers presented at the seminar are available online at <http://seminaire.samizdat.net>.

2 **Michel Foucault**, *Il faut défendre la société – Cours au Collège de France. 1976*, Seuil / Gallimard, 1997, p. 8-9.

also contributes to a pluralist composition of expert evaluations, connecting them directly with particular situations at the heart of the experiment being assessed. This politics is of course primarily characterized by its polemological bearing insofar as it concerns itself with dismantling hierarchical and disqualifying structures, but equally by its epistemic force, as it endeavors to make manifest and productive those knowledges normally kept silent or left uncultivated. Experimental projects increase their artistic, civic, and intellectual relevance when both buried knowledge is unearthed and disqualified knowledge is put to use. Intellectual cooperation means an increase in strength; indeed such a cooperation is the only way to make legible and visible the numerous knowledges embedded in particular conditions, where they are so intimately connected with the experiment they constitute that experiment and knowledge(s) ultimately become indistinguishable. Every experiment is strengthened to the degree that alliances between different knowledges are joined together in and by it. In this expansion of alliances, expert knowledges with varying horizons and status support each other to the greatest advantage of the experimentation taking place.

2. The insurrection of fragmented knowledge

“Specialized” knowledge does not normally establish itself based on its own qualities or relevance, but rather on its ability to designate what Jean-Pierre Darré calls its “conceptual inferiors.”³ This means that it depends on those it excludes and bases its authority on the multiple knowledges it manages to disqualify. Specialized knowledge founds its legitimacy on the *mea culpa* or the confession it compels from those it dominates. This leads to a knowledge of dominance, a knowledge that is *about* the other or *above* the other: the knowledge of the doctor about the patient, the knowledge of the sociologist about the welfare recipient, and so forth.⁴ Specialized discourse tends to flatten other perspectives to the point of depriving them of all meaning. These perspectives become expropriated and only survive as quotes punctuating sociological texts or as clichés peppering a political speech or a newspaper article. They are constrained by a code that is not their own, and it is only by means of this code that they can find a way to express themselves at all. “The sick person can only speak in the code given to him by the hospital;”⁵ just as the citizen can only speak in the code constructed independently of her by the state apparatus, the media industry, or the episteme of the social sciences; just as the worker can only speak in the code of the management (his “employability,” “competence,” “professional plans”). These remnants of articulated positions, expatriated onto a territory that is not initially their own (e.g. a medical diagnosis, a sociological lecture, or an article in a newspaper)—could they nevertheless stage a revolt on the very terrain onto which they were transplanted, thereby destabilizing the discourse that has incorporated them? Can a citizen’s perspective germinate in the interstices of political and journalistic discourse? Can the point of view of an unemployed or precariously employed person turn psychological or sociological discourse on its head? What political dispositive, what discursive protocol could we invent that would permit these shattered, scattered, dispossessed, and dominated perspectives to draw strength and resistance precisely from their dissemination and reduction, and that would allow them to experience their expatriation and transversality as freedom? *A point of view that is from everywhere and*

3 Darré insists that the “social construction of conceptual inferiors” is at the heart of the depreciation of knowledges drawn from experience and conceived for and in action. Cf. *La production de connaissance pour l’action (Arguments contre le racisme de l’intelligence)*, éd. de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme & Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, 1999, p. 71.

4 Freely adapted from Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire*, éd. Gallimard, Coll. Folio, 2002, p. 18.

5 Idem, p. 294.

nowhere. An untimely and creative mobility. How are we to conceive of this new episteme, this new politics that creates intellectual power where mechanisms of discreditation and inferiorization are normally at work? How could it emerge apart from out of an insurrection of fragmented and subjugated knowledges, of unqualified or disqualified perspectives? One day, perhaps, the sociologist will hear the very words chanted in the streets that were cut up into tiny pieces and integrated as illustrative quotes into her writings. One day—and this day is no doubt already here thanks to groups like Act Up—doctors will see bodies resisting the alienating technicisation they are so often subjected to in the hospital environment.

3. A level playing field

Where are we to situate ourselves politically and epistemically? Certainly not in an attempt to restore an authentic point of view that would affirm its supposed integrity of expression, language, or conceptualization. It is no longer the time to perform the “great divide,” to choose between the expressions of the sick and those of the doctor, between the “public” and the artist, the citizen and the politician; to take up again the “authentic” language of the poor, the mad, the worker, the citizen, the resident, etc. The language of the sick and their doctors, of the precariously employed and the sociologists, of the local residents and the urban planners, of the citizens and the media—they are all irreducibly intermixed, permanently intertwined. Their various expressions are clearly connected: they oppose or enrich, weaken or reinforce each other. Their interaction marks out a space of struggle or cooperation, of alliance or antagonism. The shaping of this space is fundamental because it is here that a number of political and epistemic questions will be able to emerge and be deliberated on. If we tried to reinscribe each of the positions into an alleged authenticity, we would be doing nothing but shutting them up inside themselves (the insularity of specialized knowledge), and risk the *de facto* recreation of the most crude hierarchical mechanisms. To proceed this way would be to deprive ourselves of an extraordinary political and epistemic instrument, namely the ability of the different forms of knowledge to interpellate and affect each other. Educational methods, for instance, become more relevant when what young people know about their own learning processes is taken into consideration. Public health policy will only reach its objectives if it integrates what sick people have learned from their own experiences. Professional orientation programs become meaningless if they ignore the professional dynamics developed by the workers themselves as they exercise their own abilities. We could list many other examples. Isabelle Stengers similarly evokes feminist practices or the practices of those referred to as drug addicts.⁶ By freeing ourselves from the illusory notion of authenticity, we multiply the spaces in which points of view can confront each other and expert opinions interpellate each other. Under these conditions, the interweaving of expert knowledges will be experienced as strength rather than loss (of identity or legitimacy), and hybridization will become productive of the common. In order to dismantle the hierarchies that emphasize certain points of view and discredit others, and to foil the logic of disqualification, we must construct spaces where discussion can take place on a level playing field, in both senses of the term: spaces where we speak to each other as equals (“to be on a level playing field with someone”) and spaces where statements are made on the same level (“on level ground”). The politics of knowledge we call for is then not primarily a matter of subjects or interaction between subjects (a question of ethics or comportment) but, fundamentally, a matter of dispositives and assemblages. Only

⁶ In *Cosmopolitiques – Tome 7. Pour en finir avec la tolérance*, La Découverte / Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1997, p. 55.

dispositives of this kind (those on a level playing field) are in a position to reconfigure the field of our epistemic experience.⁷

4. Reconfiguring the field of our epistemic experience

A pluralist organization of expert knowledges assumes that each participant becomes involved as everyone else's equal, without being privileged due to specialization, prestige, or seniority. There are several principles underlying this kind of assemblage, whose import is both political and epistemic, insofar as they affect both the forms of the "relationship to knowledge" (uninhibited epistemic imaginaries) as well as the structuring of the "relations of knowledge" (equal consideration of all expert knowledges involved in an experiment). To this end, the dispositives must ensure that everyone can participate equally in the discussion and have equal access to the theoretical evidence and analytical framework. The dispositives must favor the reversibility of standpoints in order to impede the crystallization of positions of knowledge and authority. Each participant must be able to freely analyze and consider the observations made by the others and, with a concern for reciprocity, submit his own questioning to the enlightened assessment of the group. Such dispositives can contribute to preventing the "natural" re-establishment of facticity and break the circularity of evidence. By virtue of their methodological make-up, the dispositives work towards reconfiguring the field of the epistemic experiment by encouraging a two-fold enlargement of the domain of expert knowledge: on one hand, by increasing the relevance of expert knowledges implicated in particular situations (whether they be creative, work-related, or "simply" have to do with life as such) and, on the other, by reinforcing people's ability to collectively question situations in which they are involved. As participants in a particular situation we will thus no longer express ourselves exclusively in terms of our position in the hierarchy of knowledge or in terms of our institutional affiliation, but according to our involvement in the methodological dispositive, which both engages and "obliges" us. It "obliges" us because it confronts us with this fundamental question: Are we open to the risk of being constructed ourselves, personally and collectively, by knowledges we develop together in the context of a particular situation?⁸ Do we accept the fact that our own position and expertise will be re-interrogated by the very thing we ourselves are creating?

5. The pluralist composition of expert knowledge

The dynamics of collective expertise encourage professionals and citizens to come out of the isolation into which they are forced by the individualist idea of competence and the hierarchy of points of view. This dispositive confronts them with new questions, posed in unaccustomed ways or, better yet, questions whose strangeness arises from the intersection and collision of different feelings, perceptions, and interpretations. In other words, a dispositive of collective expertise calls on us to engage in multiple activities: to explore the unfamiliar modes of reasoning introduced by other participants into a particular situation; to submit our own arguments to the objections of others; to really listen to what is said in the context of a collective and to stick with a conversation in which various statements interact, hesitate, and sometimes contradict each other; to reconsider the limits of our own knowledge and admit that others can sometimes transcend them. These kinds of assemblages are allied with a form of "reciprocal

7 **Josep Rafanell i orra**, "Multiplicité des dieux et politique", *Alice* n°2, summer 1999, p. 49. The archives of the journal *Alice* are available online at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net>

8 Cf. "Les savoirs constituants," *Alice*, op. cit., p. 13. The archives of the journal *Alice* are available online at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net>

extraterritoriality,"⁹ in the sense that the expert knowledges that are developed within them correspond neither to the locus nor to the authority of any one knowledge, but rather implicate the dispossession of some and the appropriation of others, always with a concern for reciprocity and reversibility. We become then like voluntary expatriates when we agree to think in contexts that are not conventionally our own and to reason from perspectives that we neither chose nor invented. This reversibility of position and reciprocity of movement stimulates an authentic form of what François Deck calls "reciprocal expertise."¹⁰

9 This phrase is freely adapted from **Giorgio Agamben**, *Moyens sans fins (Notes sur la politique)*, éd. Payot & Rivages, 1995, p. 35 et sq.

10 **François Deck**, "Expertises réciproques." This article is available online at www.iscra.fr