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ALLTAG, MEDIEN UND KULTUR

Matthias Wieser / Elena Pilipets (Hrsg.)

Medienkultur als  
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Festschrift für Rainer Winter

HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

MIKKO LEHTONEN

## A Crisis of Truth or What?

It is said that the West is amidst a crisis of knowledge and truth. If there is such a crisis, what might it be about? Is the crisis about knowledge and truth or is it about changing social relations – or both? What do we talk about when we talk about valid and legitimate knowledge? Are there any common measures to weigh what is so-called ›true knowledge‹ and what is not? Is there any common frame to debate on what constitutes ›truth‹ or ›knowledge‹? Is the ›truth‹ somewhere above everyday human beings or is it hiding in various human desires and interests? Here it is possible just to formulate some questions and sketch some directions to answer them. Hence the text at hand is a thought experiment, a preliminary mapping of largely uncharted terrain.

### 1. Populism and knowledge

After such introductory questions the readers are probably not surprised to learn that I start by discussing the new populism concerning knowledge. Such events as Trump's election or Brexit included elements of building binaries between expertise and the wisdom of the people and raised questions concerning »what forms/modes of knowledge and expertise are/might be valued and recognized« (CLARKE/NEWMAN 2017: 111). As John Clarke and Janet Newman write vis-à-vis Brexit, »Leave campaigners represented themselves as truth tellers and taboo-breakers – ›telling it like it is‹« (ibid.).

Here I want to mention two noteworthy features of such populist notions of knowledge. First, the current populist notions of knowledge tend

to rely on the notion of knowledge as something fixed. In such notions, knowledge is not seen as asking, seeking and questioning but as finding and having found. In other words, in this populist framework knowledge is not seen to be a process of knowing. Instead, knowledge is thought to be composed of true claims. Truth is not seen to be open and controversial but it is conceived to be fixed and uncomplicated. In short, knowledge is seen to be given, always already made and completed. Here, populist notions bypass the fact that the so-called ›facts‹ are made by humans. Etymologically ›fact‹ derives from Latin ›factum‹ that, in turn, derives from the verb ›facere‹ that refers to making. Even though this is often forgotten, ›fact‹ is not given but actively made.

As pivotal as these differences in seeing what knowledge is are, I will not, however, discuss them further here. Instead, I want to look closer at a second feature of the populist notions of knowledge, namely that such notions rely on the populist dichotomy between ›us‹ and ›them‹ as they differentiate ›my‹ or ›our‹ views from ›their‹ opinions, ›they‹ referring here to the learned. »Right or wrong, this is *my* view!«

The populist suspicion of literati or specialist views might be connected with what Lawrence Grossberg (2018: 94) calls »affective autonomy«, the term describing »the growing sense of separation between what matters and how it matters on the one hand, and its actual value or content«. For Grossberg, »[f]acing the inability to judge the comparative value or merit of anything, the ›reasonable‹ response seems to be to treat everything equally, or at least with equal suspicion, and to refuse to seriously invest in any one option over the others«. The only way that anything matters »is with some degree of irony and cynicism«. In such a situation, »the grounds of critical judgment have disappeared« (ibid.: 95).<sup>1</sup> Grossberg then connects this with another structure of feeling, that of narcissism: »a radical personalization of everything« (ibid.: 101) that »produces a historically unique iteration of an affective appeal to the status of experience and feeling as the only true source of value and truth« (ibid.: 102). What matters is a question of personal experience, not of knowledge or expertise. Hence passive nihilism

1 This is quite near of what Terry Eagleton (2006: 274) writes of the present politics of knowledge based on one's own interests, beliefs, commitments and desires: »there cannot be argument over the facts, since conflicting interpretative communities will formulate the issues at stake in ways which leave no common ground of agreed facts for them to scrap over. There are no conflicts, simply incommensurabilities.«

and narcissism produce together new populism vis-à-vis knowledge. It is a matter of ›my‹ or ›our‹ views against ›their‹ views here and now.

## 2. The literati as part of the elite?

The interesting question here is how those in the know or experts are in the populist conceptions of knowledge then articulated in a chain of equivalences in the way that the literati or the learned are seen as part of the privileged, the elite. I guess many researchers would today laugh sarcastically when facing the idea that we are a part of the elite. Learning does not nowadays necessarily provide an entrance into a privileged position, be that position intellectual, political, economic or other. Instead, we talk increasingly of academic precariousness. The learned may differ from those who have not had the opportunity to learn and they may even have some residual social prestige, but this does not mean that the learned would automatically be a part of the governing elite.

Seeing learnedness as a sign of one's belonging to the elite is, however, based on a bygone state of affairs. What, then, was this past state of affairs? To put it bluntly, in Europe intellectuals – at least some intellectuals – may have been a part of the ruling elites in the 17th and 18th centuries when the foundations of modern nation states were laid, and the rulers had a need for national identity building and builders. As Zygmunt Bauman (1995: 235) puts it: »nation-building called for a condensed and protracted effort to develop and instill supra-local, supra-class and supra-ethnic vision on ›national consciousness‹ [...]«. This privileged position of the intellectuals did not, however, last long. When the word ›intellectuals‹ was introduced at the end of the 19th century, »cultural uniformity may have already gradually lost much of its political importance«, which may be why »the state lost much of its original interest in cultural choice« since »political domination was secure even without the support of cultural hegemony« (ibid.: 235-236). Hence the intellectuals, when named as a group, were perhaps not antagonistic to the ruling elites but anyway distinct from them (ibid.: 228). Perhaps this is why the intellectuals saw themselves as self-appointed wardens of public values and hence thought they had the right and responsibility to speak with authority in the questions of public matters in general interest (ibid.: 224). On top of that, the intellectuals were further removed from any central position due to the 20th century developments

as culture was captured by market forces (ibid.: 236). If »the market recognizes no cultural hierarchy except the one of sellability« (ibid.: 237) there is not much need for cultural arbiters.

This is, of course, a much-simplified version of actual historical developments. It serves here only as a reminder of the fact that the learned as a group have long ago ceased to be an essential part of the ruling elite, having been replaced first by the political elite and then by the economic players. This is not to say that there have not been every now and then such intellectual groups that have been influential among the ruling elites. This, however, has not been first and foremost due to the overall social influence of the intellectuals but due to the needs of prevailing hegemonic blocs to exploit these or those ideas.

The intellectuals may have become further marginalized as a group as a consequence of the changes in the composition of the intellectuals as a group. In short, the generalists of the 17th and 18th centuries have become specialists of today. The learned are no more wardens of the common values or critics of the elites but professional experts who (contrary to the intellectuals of the Enlightenment) do not intend to educate the non-learned but want to remain superior to the lay people. The learned are the initiates, those in the know of the mysteries of their branch of activity, and hence different not only from the people but also from other professional specialist groups (BAUMAN 1992).

### 3. Academic capitalism and knowledge

The diminishing of the social weight of the intellectuals accompanies famously current academic capitalism. Already in 1979, the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard published his book which in 1984 was published in English as *The Post-Modern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard's book is perhaps best known for its idea of the death of the so-called »grand narratives«, which is possibly the most famous phrase linked to the so-called »post-modern turn«. However, the way the book discusses the changing position of knowledge in today's societies is largely forgotten. This is unfortunate, since whereas Lyotard's ideas of grand narratives seem today, amidst for example new nationalisms and forms of xenophobia, more or less outdated, his views of the status of knowledge are more topical than ever.

Lyotard (1984: 3-5) writes: »Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. [...] We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the ›knower‹, at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ›use-value‹.«

Lyotard is, then, an early analyst of the academic capitalism. In the light of his views, academic knowledge has in the last decades descended from its traditional celestial heights to earth. In these conditions, truth is »whatever we need in order to do what we need to do«, as Terry Eagleton (2006: 271) puts it.

#### 4. The lack of common frames

What does all this have to do with the production and legitimation of knowledge? If the market forces, as said, recognize no cultural hierarchy, what could serve as the legislator of what is valid knowledge and what not in the times governed by market cries? To ask this is not to say that the intellectuals of the 17th and 18th centuries or the political governors of the 19th century would have offered incontestable frames for the legitimation of knowledge. The European nation-states claimed that their basic principles – liberty, equality, autonomy, democracy – were universal but we know well that they were particular. To quote Stuart Hall (2000: 228): »it is now clear that liberalism is not ›the culture that is beyond cultures‹ but the culture that won: that particularism which successfully universalized and hegemonized itself across the globe.« If this is so, neither the interpretative frameworks of liberalism were universal but particular. So, we cannot go back from the current individual ›consumer‹ of the markets to



the allegedly universal ›citizen‹ of modern nation-states simply because that citizen is not a universal figure. Nevertheless, we might return to the figure of the ›citizen‹ in one sense. Where the ›consumer‹ makes choices first and foremost along the individual lines, the ›citizens‹ were said to have one common frame of legitimation. That frame of legitimation was not universal but particular. It was not given but constructed. Yet it was a frame that was meant to be common, shared by everyone.

Linking ›facts‹ and ›truths‹ to each other is not without relevance. Isolated facts are not the same thing as knowledge. Alone, facts are mute. They become knowledge only when they are connected with something, interpreted from some perspective. Knowledge goes beyond the immediate horizons of experience. It is a fact that in the morning the sun rises in the East and in the evening it sets in West. It is knowledge that the sun does not go around the Earth but the other way around. Facts become knowledge only when they are contextualized and explained. Knowledge is not synonymous with empirist and positivist one-dimensional ›truths‹. Instead, knowledge equals interpreting facts in various frames, linking them with different explanatory contexts.

In these days of the alleged ›crisis of knowledge‹ the crisis may perhaps lie exactly in the fact that we do not have such a common frame of legitimation. The economic yardstick, that is money, cannot work as the criterion since it is about prices but not about values. Hence, we face the challenge of negotiating for a common frame of legitimation while knowing all too well that no such frame can be universal but is necessarily always already constructed.

##### 5. Beyond the dichotomy of absolute truth and human relativism

The truth is multifarious. It changes constantly. It can be controversial and contradictory. Yet the truth matters. What is at a given time and in a given place held to be true, forms the premises of how people act. Perhaps we will not get rid of the fact that we have the incommensurable regimes of truth, but we might, in spite of this, discuss the common criteria for measuring the values of various systems of knowledge or even comparing them with each other. The choice is not between some absolute truth, free of humans on the one hand and human relativism on the other. Knowledge and truth

are always both contingent and real. They are not and cannot be universal, but neither are they just relative by their nature. Instead, the challenge is to develop »simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects [...] and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ›real‹ world«, as Donna Haraway (1991: 187) put it in her classical essay on situated knowledges. »Immortality and omnipotence are not our goals«, Haraway wrote, instead, »we could use some enforceable, reliable accounts of things not reducible to power moves and agonistic, high status games of rhetoric or to scientist, positivist arrogance« (ibid.: 188). For Haraway, knowledge that would come outside of the human practices, from »the standpoint of a master«, would be and is »truly fantastic, distorted, and so irrational« (ibid.: 193). Haraway's alternative to such knowledge is famously positioning: »feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*« (ibid.: 188). For her, »rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement: to be from everywhere and so nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable. Rational knowledge is a process of ongoing critical interpretation among ›fields‹ of interpreters and decoders« (ibid.: 196).

In here, the idea of *lenticularity* might come in handy. The term ›lenticularity‹ might be new, but the idea is old. Not only are there at the same time many worlds, such as the world of gastronomy, the world of animals or the world of Harry Potter. On top of this, and actually first and foremost, the one world we all have is always already multiple. The term ›lenticularity‹, used by Lebanese born anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2016), has its roots in the Latin word ›lenticula‹, meaning ›lens‹. For Hage, lenticularity means that one and the same thing is simultaneously many depending on the lenses through which it is viewed. In other words, a lenticular is an image that appears differently depending on how you look at it. In contrast to the single image captured in the common photograph, the lenticular surface contains multiplicity of images or realities that reveal themselves perspectively. It should be stressed that the lenticular surface does not offer one image that looks differently according to how you look at it, it contains many (usually two and sometimes three) images or realities, that only come forth from a particular perspective in the process of encountering the surface.

On top of that, for Hage world is constituted in the continual interactions and conflicts of these multiple worlds. One of Hage's examples of the

simultaneous multiplicity of worlds is a situation where a male feminist is subjected to positive discrimination in filling an academic post. He asks: Which lens is given more weight, the one that notices the biological sex of the applicant or the lens that sees his politico-ethical convictions, both being at the same time equally real? Another of Hage's examples of the simultaneous multiplicity of some entity is conflicts between long-term partners. He asks: Has any couple ever had a conflict just about some issue without also quarreling about what the whole conflict is all about? In other words, often the conflicts are not only about something but also about the frames within which that something should be understood. Of course, this applies also to other relations and conflicts than those between long-time partners. Hage mentions the civil war in his home country, Lebanon, from 1975 till 1990, where one side of the conflict saw it as an anti-imperialist war directed towards the United States, whereas the other side thought that they were waging a pro-Christian war. This Hage calls the entanglement of realities.

In the light of Haraway's thoughts, truth and knowledge are situated. In the light of Hage's thoughts, truth and knowledge are multiple. So, how to build such frames in which competing truth-claims could be measured and put in a mutual dialogue?

## 6. A common horizon?

Here we are on the edge of existing liberal political discourses. As Stuart Hall (2000: 235) asks: »How [...] can the particular and the universal, the claims of both difference and equality, be recognized?« In order to solve this problem, Hall says, we »have to put our minds seriously [...] to some new and novel ways of *combining* difference and identity, drawing together on the same terrain those formal incommensurables of political vocabularies – liberty and equality *with* difference, ›the good‹ and ›the right‹.« In short, the dilemma to be solved is how to be at the same time *both* different *and* equal. Nevertheless, not only that. As Hall (*ibid.*) stresses, »the process cannot be allowed to remain with this political assertion of radical particularity. It must attempt to construct a diversity of new public spheres in which all particulars will be transformed by being obliged to negotiate within a broader horizon.«

So, perhaps the crisis of knowledge is in the last instance a crisis of commensuration. To end these musings with two questions: On what grounds do we measure different regimes of truth? How do we build dialogues between various systems of knowledge without any of them assuming that they are universal but seeing their own particularity and the weaknesses and strengths this contains?

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