Reflections

Towards washing the baby in the bathwater? – commentary to Refstie

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Häkli, J. (2022) Towards washing the baby in the bathwater? – commentary to Refstie. *Fennia* 200(1) 72–73. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.121950

As a response to Hilde Refstie's research paper 'Reconfiguring research relevance – steps towards salvaging the radical potential of the co-productive turn in searching for sustainable solutions', in this commentary I reflect on some of the issues that I consider key elements in her timely and important argument. I mainly pay attention to how she lays out the key problems in co-creative research in our fast-paced academia that meets the increasing demands for relevance coming from the policymaking for sustainability. Yet, Refstie's paper also states that we do not necessarily have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. I end with some remarks on where Refstie's argument for rescuing the critical potential of co-creative research meets its understandable limits.

Keywords: co-creation, nudging, critique

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It is a great pleasure for me to comment on Hilde Refstie's Fennia lecture and the subsequent paper that develops a highly interesting and timely critique of a growing co-productive trend in academic research (Refstie 2022). The paper gives us a lot to think about. In my comments I will focus mostly on the idea of co-creation as a way to involve stakeholders in knowledge production that serves policy development, and to some extent also on the problems involved in the ways in which the notion of sustainability lends itself to political uses.

To start from the idea of co-creation, which forms the core of Refstie's argument, I fully agree on the need to pay more attention to the risks involved when research agendas are being set top-down. In such situations, co-creative knowledge production may end up adopting uncritically the ideas, world views, and strategies of powerful societal players, such as major companies, governmental institutions, higher education organizations, funding agencies, and importantly, as the paper also points out, their new partnerships. In this context, increasingly characterized by "fast policymaking" as Refstie (2022, 160) characterizes it, the language of co-creation risks becoming just another legitimation strategy – especially so when coupled with another prime tool for legitimating development projects: the notoriously fuzzy concept of sustainability. In view of these starting points, Refstie's key message is that co-creative settings risk co-opting academic work so that its contents get "nudged" towards

URN:NBN:fi:tsv-oa121950
DOI: 10.11143/fennia.121950

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goals set top-down, and the space for critical questioning narrows down (Refstie 2022, 163). This is a paradoxical outcome for co-creative research that has represented attempts to achieve precisely the opposite. Yet, as the paper convincingly argues, such impacts coming from co-creative research settings are difficult to identify because they are not openly imposed top-down, but rather occur as a set of smaller choices about research foci, priorities, and partnerships down the line. This makes it difficult to sustain a critical awareness of the problems in co-creative research, especially as the latter is perceived as the new stronghold of academic research's societal relevance.

Having laid out the challenges, Refstie's paper nevertheless takes its aim at a more positive note, stating that we do not necessarily have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. More specifically, we do not have to be helplessly co-opted in co-creative processes orchestrated top-down. Instead, we can struggle to regain control of our work and its broader ethical and political ramifications. This might occur through sustained efforts at "critical reconfiguration" the idea of societal relevance of academic research (Refstie 2022, 161). Mindful of the multiple efficiency pressures in current neoliberalized academia, Refstie points at the need to secure spaces for scholarly activism that allow slower and deeper reflexivity concerning co-creative research agendas, following ideas that come from critical, feminist and decolonial thought.

As the notion of research relevance is one of the paper's core ideas, it would merit some more discussion on what it means in practice to reconfigure it – what might be the steps towards rescuing the radical potential of the co-productive turn. This is where Refstie's detailed and thoroughly argued-for discussion on redeeming the critical potential of co-creative research remains sketchy and does so in a way that leaves much space for further elaboration. Indeed, what could be "the right conditions" that allow critical scholars to sustain the "critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable" edge of their co-creative efforts, at once societally relevant and academically progressive (Refstie 2022, 169)? In this paper we are left short for an answer, but understandably so as questions of this magnitude can only be touched upon in the space of one academic paper. This notwithstanding, I have thoroughly enjoyed reading and commenting on Refstie's paper, which presents an important critical discussion on questions that fast scholarship on policymaking for sustainability fixes has often had too little time, or courage, to reflect upon.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank *Fennia* editors Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and James Riding for the possibility to engage in a conversation with Hilde Refstie on her inspiring text.

References

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