

speaking out

On Houses, Villages and *Knowledges*

Peter Spink

Getulio Vargas Foundation, São Paulo, Brazil



The university is a curious collective of teaching, research and extra-mural extension fused with reflection, seriousness and rigor under the heading of higher learning. But university is not synonymous with knowledge. It is only one of a variety of places in which familiarity, acquaintance, intimacy or understanding of people, facts and events—expressed as theory or practice—can happen. Knowledge, as Mead pragmatically stated, ‘is the discovery through the implication of things and events of some thing or things which enable us to carry on when a problem has held us up’ (Mead, 1956: 321). If the university is to assume the evocative image of a house of knowledge, then any discussion of its future must take into consideration the many other houses that are also in the village.

To draw attention to different knowledge houses is not merely a question of recognizing that the university needs to see itself within a network of research and technological development, nor of noticing that the mode of scientific enquiry is an increasingly open affair. Both these aspects do play their part in broadening perspectives, yet often serve to legitimize the existing framework by extending rather than confronting the status quo. The challenge comes from very different and increasingly active sources of knowledge, or *knowledges*, many of which the university has previously ignored. The presence of *knowledges* is not a new phenomenon nor is the idea of multiple and separate locations. Social historians have shown how constantly the collective capacity to confront specific world views with alternative theories about social organization has erupted as protest, revolution and reform. These practical notions of social intervention and change do not disappear as the centuries pass, but remain active within language, practice, everyday events, tradition and superstition (Thompson, 1993). Whilst certain *knowledges* might seek or gain temporary hegemony over institutional explanations, other *knowledges* will also be present, derived from the non-important yet practically



Organization 8(2)

Contemporary Production of Knowledge

vital events of the everyday to provide, as Bloch (1977) observed, a permanent basis for tension and contradiction. Referred to as custom and practice, the everyday-life world is permeated by tacit *knowledges* that can be mobilized collectively for intervention and change.

The university is just one of many socially produced spaces for constructing and transmitting *knowledges*. Yet it frequently acts as if it were alone and aloof; separate even in the architectural language of the closed quadrangle or the modern campus. Can it meet the challenge of the tensions present amongst *knowledges* and their associate mechanisms of explanation and dissemination, especially within the contradictions of late modernity?

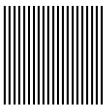
Setting the Scene

Debate over the fluctuating and progressive relation between the institutional arrangements of society and the collectivity is a mark of modernity. The right of expression, of the independence of views and of a balance of forces in relation to government or state are constant discursive strands for many of the essayists debating notions of liberty in the early 19th century; a period when a new cycle of universities was being formed, building on and departing from previous traditions.

Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Campbell's University College, for example, opened in London in 1828 as a non-residential university for the study of modern subjects by students of all or no religious beliefs. The question that the 'modern' universities, as they called themselves, posed was not about creating or locating knowledge, but about access to it. Sidney Webb, co-founder with Beatrice Webb of the London School of Economics, expressed in a memorandum in 1909 the need for London as a university for the sons and daughters of households of limited means and strenuous lives, to dive through every stratum of its wide constituency and be ready to enroll not hundreds but thousands of students a year (McGregor, 1990).

The opening of new universities and of different types of centers for investigation broadened the social ecology of accepted knowledge houses. In Paris, the Pasteur Institute was inaugurated in 1888, a result of the demand for vaccines and the lack of organizational capacity in the Ecole Normal Superieur (an early science park!). But the differences between *knowledges*, especially between those that were institutionally legitimate and those emerging in the day to day of practice and dispute, were largely held at bay. Working-class movements had developed their own independent schools and various forms of alternative self-instructed collectivization had attempted to challenge the conventional institutions. But these were ignored; usually by the simple mechanism of not recognizing their diplomas (if they had them) or their teachers.

During the period of technological expansion surrounding the Second World War, the university house of knowledge continued to play a central role even though increasingly linked to other actors in the chain of



On Houses, Villages and *Knowledges*

Peter Spink

application. The connotation of direction was clear: from the pure to the applied to the society, reproducing both the diffusion view of science and technology (Latour, 1987) and the separation of the laboratory (both physical and social) from the outside world.

Applied centers did exist even though their research had a second-class status. In the social field, they would make a significant contribution, along with charities, church groups and social movements to establishing a basis from which the more militant and independent advocacy organizations, or non-governmental organizations, would later spring. Here, at least, socially committed applied researchers for whom investigation, action and learning formed a collaborative and inseparable process were able to pursue a different, albeit marginalized, idea of knowledge.

The force of this hegemonic ordering of knowledge can be seen in a classic example drawn from the area of organizational research. In the early 1950s, members of the Tavistock Institute carried out the series of studies in work organization in the British coal mining industry that led to the socio-technical theory of organizational choice; a critical refutation of technological determinism. Key to the argument was Chopwell, Durham, where miners worked under a form of organization that was referred to as a semi-autonomous working group (Trist et al., 1963).

Teams, or sets, of 41 men ran the entire longwall face operation over three different shifts, 24 hours a day, during periods of over a year in length without any explicit leadership structure. They took their own decisions, trained colleagues, negotiated with the mine support staff and shared equally the salaries involved, including the various extras for production and special work. They had in effect collectivized the day-to-day work space. The ideas and practice of composite work had been developed by the miners themselves and negotiated with the local mine management; recovering and transforming their own knowledge of the older shortwall tradition. As the findings began to circulate through the social and organizational sciences, they crossed the voluminous output of laboratory studies on small groups. The result was that the semi-autonomous work groups were incorporated into university discourse as small work teams allowed a limited amount of self-organization under flexible leadership and, also, a technique that had been developed by the Tavistock team.

Chopwell had a collective history of action in the labor movement that included trade union rights and representation, self education and the fight for women's suffrage. One of the first mines to enter action in the General Strike of 1926, it was one of what were called the red villages of Durham. Its Lodge banner carried the pictures of Marx, Lenin and Keir Hardie and a saying from Walt Whitman—pioneers oh pioneers.

The development and negotiation of the composite method some 30 years later was not separate from these earlier events. The push for industrialization in the 1950s had led to fragmented methods, individual



Organization 8(2)

Contemporary Production of Knowledge

pay scales, uncertain work hours and constant supervision; generating tensions that spilled over to the closed mining community. Concerned by these consequences, the miners sought, in their words, to restore harmony (Murray and Spink, 1979). Not the harmony between men and management, because that was an area of permanent conflict; on the contrary, the harmony was that between men as villagers and as miners, harmony necessary for them to maintain the solidarity necessary to stand together and fight for their rights. In going against the received wisdom of mining engineers, of those who saw it as inevitable that mechanization would produce task specialization, they were to gradually piece together an alternative practice, to build and transform meaning through action and intervention (Bahktin, 1973).

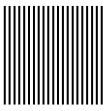
However, in the conventional wisdom of the university world, there was little place for the idea that a good theory might come into life elsewhere. That those facing the problems might be able to draw on *knowledges* that exist within their own socio-historical frame, their own spaces and places, was not something that the academic social science and organizational establishments could handle. The periphery had nothing to teach the center.

Deconstructing Development

Whilst the symbolic starting gun is usually awarded to President Truman's 1949 inaugural address (Sachs, 1992), the image of an evolutionary scale from developed to underdeveloped nations, and the role of industry, schooling and research for creating and strengthening democracy had been piecing itself together for some time. The notion of areas and populations being backward or behind and in need of development also drew on and in turn supported the diffusion assumption. By the 1960s, major investment programs, new multilateral institutions, overseas aid and economic cooperation for development were all spreading the idea that there was knowledge available to be pushed outwards from the traditional centers and pushed downwards to the poor and needy.

In recent years, the development discourse has come under increasing attack from the emergence of new social actors, different—ecological—frameworks for science and technology, and the measurable increase in poverty brought about by a globalization that divides as it unites (Escobar, 1995; Bauman, 1998). The reconfiguration of the dilemmas of poverty within the context of inequality and social exclusion is bringing very different meaning to words like empowerment, citizenship and social change (Friedmann, 1992; Sen, 1999).

In a series of recent meetings, Brazilian academics, applied researchers, government officials, social workers and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) met to discuss local strategies for poverty reduction and exclusion. The constant conflicts between the different groups was summed up by a community worker who, in talking about her widely respected work in urban renewal and community mobilization, was to



On Houses, Villages and *Knowledges*

Peter Spink

say that there was no clear framework for such interventions and no identifiable bridge with academic theory. But, in practice, as she saw it, people just got on without it (Camarotti and Spink, 2000).

Contrary to her own statement, there is knowledge present within the community worker's actions, just as it was present at Chopwell. However, it is practical and transformational knowledge rather than knowledge that academics would recognize as such. It emerges from a posture in which it is 'the vocabulary of practise, rather than of theory, of action rather than contemplation, in which one can say something about truth' (Rorty, 1982: 162). Hence, the radical simplicity in her comment: it both points to the problem and simultaneously closes the door.

Perhaps it is the continued resistance of the university and the adjacent houses on the same block to alterity that has unwittingly stimulated the very process by which knowledge is being reframed. In many third-world countries, work on patterns of public innovation at sub-national level is pointing to the absence, if not the apathy, of the customary houses of knowledge. In their place are different types of people, organizations and movements working in different interorganizational arrangements alongside local governments and other professionals, mobilizing different *knowledges* in the attempt to develop a minimum of service provision and social inclusion.

The university response to globalization has been in general a sadly predictable one. Trapped by their fascination with the new market order, the OECD-based universities sweep out to build trading links with the far reaches of the globe, in order to pass on knowledge to the less fortunate. Distance learning has always been important, but in the hands of the mercantilist knowledge vendors it becomes a way to bypass local competence and open up markets. Nationally, country after country is embracing the academic audit culture, confusing measures with targets and further marginalizing alternative practices through the normative identification of the desirable (Strathern, 1997).

What sustains the community worker and her many colleagues is the presence of a whole host of other collectives that have also committed themselves to the idea that dignity and moral competence are key attributes of social action. The impact in recent times of social movements, advocacy groups and service NGOs has been considerable—both local and global. This has not taken place simply because of their capacity for pressure, but because of the practical *knowledges* they have developed and can articulate.

The university—which for some time was civil society—seems to have retreated from its reference role on the turbulent intersection of system and life world. It may not have lost its institutional memory, as events testify from time to time, but it has become dormant. Its quadrangles and campus seem closed to the organic intellectuals from Gramsci's civil society of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic conflict, nor is it very



Organization 8(2)

Contemporary Production of Knowledge

happy with the militants and activists of Habermas' 'network of associations that institutionalize problem solving discourse on questions of general interest within the framework of organized public spheres' (1996: 367). It may be the same university students and junior staff who are at the barricades against the international financial community or fighting for sustainable development; but their banners carry the names of social movements and independent associations and not, anymore, of their universities.

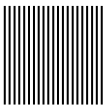
Periphery as Embedded Knowledge

Local knowledge and common sense are plural and embedded (Geertz, 1983). As *knowledges* they are recognized, called upon, taught and transferred, can vary dramatically and are normally hidden away behind statements as to their obviousness. They are embedded; their invisible libraries are comprised of the intrinsic, the inherent and the way things go.

The story of the Krahò people, a semi-nomadic society comprising some 1500 members currently occupying 2000 square miles in the Brazilian brushwood area of the State of Tocantins, provides a final illustration. In the 1970s, the Brazilian Government persuaded the Krahò to switch from growing their traditional giant maize and other grains to rice, in order to create a surplus that could be sold off for income generation. But the land was inadequate; the former family plots, which functioned in a linked manner, gave way to huge collective plots for rice, dismantling patterns of governance and property, generating conflict between families and a general collapse. By the beginning of the 1980s, the Krahò were considered a hopeless case of social incompetence and were left, essentially, to starve.

Also in the 1970s, the National Center for Genetic and Biotechnological Resources had begun to gather the seeds of naturally occurring plants, with the object of preserving the genetic variability of species. A casual conversation between one of the National Center's technicians and somebody who had been working alongside the Krahò led, following many discussions amongst the Krahò elders, to the return of 50 giant maize seeds. In 1995, as the maize was planted and started to grow, other practices and traditions were recuperated from within the collective memory, having as their base the common-sense world of the maize and all it involved. Today, a whole host of activities are being undertaken, some traditional such as seed exchanges and other new such as small animal breeding and food conservation. In an important act, the Krahò elders took specimens of all their crops to be stored once more in the cold chambers of the seed bank.

Embedded knowledge is a socio-technical rather than social phenomenon, in that it is rooted in products, artifacts, traces, instruments and events. Once recovered, it provided a basis for exploring new patterns of



On Houses, Villages and *Knowledges*

Peter Spink

farming in a similar way that the embedded knowledge of the Chopwell shortwall provided a basis for the longwall. What is more, it relied on the mutual respect shown by users of different *knowledges* systems in forming horizontal links of discussion and debate. Learning to relate across *knowledges*, be these of peoples, communities, urban or rural groupings of different kinds, or professions is fraught with difficulties and contradictions. Understanding this leads to a different start point for dialog in the village of *knowledges*; not understanding generates the ruptures within which community workers disconnect. Is the university up to the challenge? Can it find its seeds?

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (Volochinov) (1973) *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*. London: Seminar Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1998) *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bloch, Maurice (1977) 'The Past and the Present in the Present', *Man* 12(2): 278–92.
- Camarotti, Ilka and Spink, Peter (2000) *Estratégias Locais para Redução da Pobreza: Construindo a Cidadania*. São Paulo: Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas.
- Escobar, Arturo (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Friedmann, John (1992) *Empowerment—the Politics of Alternative Development*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Geertz, Clifford (1983) *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Latour, Bruno (1987) *Science in Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McGregor, O.R. (1990) 'The Social Sciences', in Francis M.L. Thompson (ed.) *The University of London and the World of Learning 1836–1986*. London: Hambledon Press.
- Mead, George H. (1956) 'History and the Experimental Method', in A. Strauss (ed.) *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology*, pp 319–27. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Murray, Hugh and Spink, Peter (1979) 'Socio-technical Systems in Mining: Three Follow-up Studies', Tavistock Institute, Document No. 2T204.
- Rorty, Richard (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sachs, Wolfgang, ed. (1992) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. London: Zed Books.
- Sen, Amartya (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1997) 'Improving Ratings: Audit in the British University System', *European Review* 5(3): 305–21.
- Thompson, Edward P. (1993) *Customs in Common*. New York: The New Press.
- Trist, Eric. L., Murray, Hugh, Higgin, Gurth W. and Pollock, Alex B. (1963) *Organizational Choice*. London: Tavistock Publications.



Organization 8(2)

Contemporary Production of Knowledge

Peter Spink is a social psychologist and Professor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, São Paulo, where he also chairs the Public Management and Citizenship Program.

Address: Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Av. 9 de Julho 2029, São Paulo (SP) CEP 01313-902, Brazil. [email: spink@fgvsp.br]