

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Arnaud Sales and Marcel Fournier, eds., *Knowledge, Communication and Creativity*. SAGE Studies in International Sociology 56. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007, 192 pp., \$US 99.00 hardcover (978-0-7619-4306-8)

This ambitious volume — which appears to be a conference proceedings, although its precise genesis remains undisclosed — gathers together some of the most interesting social-scientific thinking currently underway in Europe and North America. While broadly classifiable as sociology of knowledge, the book ranges over a vast and complex territory, thus defying neat review. The editors themselves seek thematic coherence by a tripartite arrangement of the nine chapters, following an introductory essay. For the record, the sections are: Knowledge and Social Change in Contemporary Societies; New Information Technologies and Communication, Communities and the Public Sphere; and Creativity and Communication in the Production of Knowledge. However, since most of the essays could fit anywhere, the arrangement is futile. Here, therefore, I will offer brief individual summaries, before trying to educe any major overarching messages.

“Knowledge,” according to Nico Stehr, “is not merely the master key for unravelling the secrets of nature and society but the becoming of a world” (p. 34). Scientific and technical knowledge, he argues, is not only of unprecedented incidence, but has also replaced land and capital as the chief resource in modern economies. Stehr is pleased, maintaining that while the fragility of societies has increased, so has the freedom of the average individual. The book thus opens on a refreshingly positive, as well as laudably lucid, note. Jerald Hage follows with a detailed examination of the relationship between knowledge and the evolution of “organizational populations,” that is, “organizations that share a similar technology and marketplace or technological regime,” such as telephone companies or credit unions (p. 43). Coaxing into proximity several disparate disciplinary literatures, Hage evolves the claim that, while industrialization was characterized by consolidation, the trend is now towards differentiation, a result of public policies as well as of the general increase in knowledge.

John Urry suggests that life in knowledge-based network societies is increasingly shaped by mobilities of many kinds, such as affordable air

travel and, especially, mobility enabled by digital devices and other high-technology innovations. “The dichotomies of real/unreal, face-to-face/life-on-the-screen, immobile/mobile, community/virtual and presence/absence,” he concludes after some deft analysis, “need to be dispensed with” (p. 74). Craig Calhoun takes up the technology theme in a chapter on information technology’s role in the development of a global political public sphere. While Calhoun’s premise that there is little relevant social science research might come as a surprise to the international community of scholars specializing in that field, his discussion is generally well-balanced. He is surely correct to conclude, *inter alia*, that “it will be important for those who would open up the public sphere to figure out how to work within organizations (including corporations and states) not just against them or in seemingly separate and autonomous ‘communities’” (p. 94). With a somewhat similar burden, Philippe Breton presents an overview of the history of rhetoric as a form of knowledge. Aristotle paved the way for science by breaking with his Platonist mentors in their insistence that only necessary truths could be certain — he rated “truth over friendship” (quoted on p. 117). Unlike science, however, rhetoric has always struggled to win the status of knowledge. Yet as Breton points out, the quality of public speech is a vital issue in democratic societies, because only in such societies are popular political arguments heard.

The rest of the chapters deal more directly with the concept of creativity. “I have,” Steve Fuller laments, “come to believe that an Orwellian regime of Newspeak is colonizing our understanding of social life”; moreover, “the alleged uniqueness of the contemporary world as a ‘knowledge society,’ or even just an ‘information society,’ epitomizes this Newspeak” (p. 97). Fuller makes a characteristically subtle case, citing concepts such as mobility (*pace* Urry, presumably) and innovation, that a pernicious form of epistemological relativism is at work in sociology, and concludes that the hallmark of contemporary societies is not so much creativity as pseudocreativity. In a more empirical vein, Rogers Hollingsworth proposes that there is a strong correlation between high cognitive complexity, particularly the ability to make connections between disciplines, and the potential to make important discoveries in the biomedical sciences. He also suggests, arrestingly, that people with this ability have often experienced plural national, class, or religious cultures, often been outsiders: “it was this capacity to live in more than one world simultaneously that was the key to having high cognitive complexity” (p. 135). On the other hand, Randall Collins argues that eminent intellectuals in the arts and humanities tend to congregate in cliques and that that partly explains their creativity. He deduces that it is the cluster,

not the individual, that is the subject of creativity, that it is “the networks who are the actors on the stage” (p. 165). Finally, Michele Lamont, Marcel Fournier, Joshua Guetzkow, Gregoir Mallard, and Roxane Bernier probe the tacit criteria of assessments of originality in academic peer review. Drawing upon interviews with members of research funding panels, they find that moral judgements about applicants remain significant, alongside the merits of the proposals themselves, in the discussions leading to appropriations.

It will be evident, even from a necessarily oversimplified summary, that the essays in this volume are largely free-standing. However, while the book is irreducibly eclectic, some themes can perhaps be teased out. One, of course, is the rich complexity and variability of the concept of knowledge. Another is the manifold value of interdisciplinarity. A third is the role of institutions — and, more generally, of structure as opposed to agency — in the communication and development of knowledge. The book also supplies insights into the still-incomplete sociological description of “postindustrial” society. It would indeed have been enhanced by more explicit treatment of the postindustrial or information society theme. Creativity, for example, has been posited as a defining feature of postindustrial societies, but this potential link lies unexplored in the present volume. Fifthly, though no doubt not finally, the arguments have policy implications, pointing, at least, to the importance of wise political governance, and perhaps even social engineering, in the promotion — the becoming — of a knowledge-based democratic world. All of these leads could be profitably developed.

Part of the strength of the volume is that, in many cases, the contributors are presenting in summary form the results of major research programs. This makes for high information content, but also for density, for a sense of argumentation moving forward too quickly on disputable points. With cold analysis, conclusions are not always reliably entailed. Also on the debit side, there is some sloppy copy-editing, such as “plan” for “play” (p. 81), “treaties” for “treatises” (p. 117), “More” for “Moore” (p. 157), and — my personal favourite — “wining applicants” (p. 173). Moreover, it is simply not acceptable for a 2007 publication to inform us that “a trend in twentieth-century science has [*sic*] been towards increasing specialization” (p. 130). However, these are minor irritations, in any case partially defused by helpful indexing. On the whole, the collection presents sociology in its most engaging and contemporary form. I am confident that anyone interested in the concept of knowledge will be greatly challenged by many of the materials in this volume.

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