Knowledge of precariousness and mobility

Intellectual work and knowledge production in a context of socio-political insecurity and uncertainty

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This book has two introductions. The first is a point of view, necessarily individual, on an effort undertaken by a group of researchers who express themselves in this book. The second introduction, this one, is written in four hands, spoken in two voices. It is the result of a dialogue between two of the members of the group (Joëlle Le Marec and Hester Du Plessis). It is indeed a question of attempting different forms of expression, beyond the general introduction and the chapters. These texts all testify not to a unified theoretical front to address the links between knowledge and precariousness. Almost on the contrary, we want to keep a plurality of works, testimonies, and modes of writing, and to take the measure, first of all, together, to reflect on the experiences and theoretical approaches to this question.

We are therefore attempting here, the two of us, who live in countries with such different environmental, political and scientific environments, to reflect on the modes of relationship between precariousness and knowledge. We are doing so on the basis of approaches that seem to us to be good for the construction, even partial, of a broad framework that welcomes the plurality of scientific affiliations and, above all, that welcomes the way in which these affiliations are all challenged by the common conviction that we must change our scientific practices and sociabilities.

We shall begin by some elements on the importance of precariousness as a condition directly linked by Guy Standing to globalized capitalism, and which gives rise – again – to the threatening imaginary of a new "dangerous" class. The precariousness

created and suffered that endangers those who live it, is immediately reversed and represented in such a way that precariousness appears as a threat to the most preserved fractions, and therefore the most tempted to preserve their privileges. To this end, they try to control representations and fears, relying, if necessary, on the knowledge and techniques of the legitimate institutional scientific world.

Scientists are themselves affected by the strong tension between a taste for conformism which, under cover of distance, rigour and demands, prevent them from perceiving the extent of the damage done to individuals and, more generally, to the whole living world, and an aspiration to create new knowledge that may enable them to envisage other common futures.

If scientists do not engage in the creation of new knowledges which are necessary, others will do so. Indeed, they are already doing so, and the recognition of knowledge of general interest developed outside the academic field is now an important part of science studies and the anthropology of knowledge.

We then propose to present at least two related ways in which the academic world and the social world have already thought about the conditions of possibility for creativity and openness in the production of knowledge ; ways that are not immediately closed through service to institutional powers.

The first reflection concerns transdisciplinarity as a requirement and as a practice, consistent with the affirmation of transgression as well as scientific creativity, and consistent with the opening up of the stakes of the expression and public communication of knowledge. The second reflection, linked to the previous one, concerns investigation as a practice that continually escapes disciplinary specialisation, a claim to technicality that isolates research, and even the autonomy of scientific knowledge.

This double framework, philosophical and empirical, is a way of pooling our resources in order to imagine, on the one hand, the points of attention that we give each other and, on the other hand, other types of dialogues or compositions between approaches practised by other members of the group. We also have in our group critical political perspectives in the face of authoritarian powers, the care and the creation in research on and with migrants, the ethics of inquiry in social sciences and journalism, a poetic approach of moving beyond borders in sciences and journalism, and a reflection on violence from the point of view of academics and medias.

1 Precariousness : who is it dangerous for ?

Work in the institutional and informal sectors has changed over the years : it is difficult to count on career stability, and social situations are evolving towards increasing precariousness. Self-employment, personal trajectories, contract work and the shift to alternative lifestyles have created a change in social structures traditionally linked to employment stability. Social structures are being destabilised by the persistence and scale of unemployment and the creation of precariousness as a new social class. Temporary, part-time and self-employment are the direct result of neo-liberal policies obsessed with capital, profit and competition for economic privileges. By articulating the notion of labour flexibility forged by the radical Italian left, the demands of the

May Day Parade 2001 demonstration (the San Precarion) and the reflections on the renewal of the frameworks within which the notion of social class is thought of (Guy Standing, 2010. 2012. 2017), precariat has become an accepted notion in the world of work and academia to define those who find themselves on the margins of institutions and the economy.

For citizens who are part of the precariat and have precarious lives, work does not only mean living in economic instability. It also implies lifestyles that are different from those of the elites who are the main resource extractors and consumers and who support and benefit from the capitalist system. Standing (2012, 2017) went so far as to distinguish the social groups that would constitute the precariat as a new "dangerous class". In the first place, the identities associated with the precariat feed an atavistic populism supported by neo-fascist parties and demagogues who play on the fears of the precariat by presenting "foreigners"or then the "other" (migrants, Muslims, white/black) as the cause of their insecurity. Secondly, they are associated with anarchist fractions, which are said to have abnormal and anti-social behaviour, favouring the rise of violence, the development of social pathologies and the loss of faith in politics in general. Finally, one would meet idealists and utopians, progressive people who are convinced that change is possible and who would get involved in organising social uprisings. These identities would also be at work in the main so-called "anti-systemic" movements : the "social movements" (in reaction to oppression suffered by employers) and the "national movements" (in reaction to the oppression of ethno-national groups) as identified by Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins and Emmanuel Wallerstein (1989).

The analysis of the political and economic causes that determined the formation of precariousness, and the production of representations of precariousness as a new "dangerous class", cannot take the place of knowledge about precariousness. Rather, they appear as the constitution of precariousness as an object, which reveals a position of analysis outside the phenomenon. The representation of a "dangerous class" reveals the place from which this point of view is constructed : sensitivity to danger or risk is not associated with the experience of precariousness but with the disorder that can result from the constitution of precariousness as a phenomenon affecting "society". We lack the knowledge that exists but which is largely produced outside the enclaves of institutions and academia. The precariat is one of the phenomena that challenge the monopoly of the production of common knowledge by academic institutions.

2 The production of knowledge since precariousness : the Chicago School

The situation is reminiscent of the conditions that led to the emergence of what was called the "Chicago school" at the beginning of the century in the United States (Grafmeyer and Joseph, 1979) : knowledge about American society was produced in field surveys often carried out by people directly concerned by situations that subsequently became sociological objects. This is the case, for example, with the experiences and knowledge practices of migrants and seasonal workers (Nels Anderson, 1923). This work, which was requalified *a posteriori* as sociological and representative

of a school, was nevertheless carried out outside the institutional framework on the basis of the enigmas felt as such by the investigators. It is in our interest to restore the meaning of this production of knowledge.

We can make the link between the conditions of knowledge production in this period of the 1920s following the massive arrival of migrants in American big cities, and the current conditions of production of knowledge with its growing instability and precariousness.

Now, as then, the production of knowledge is shifting to the field of lived phenomena. It escapes the boundaries of specialised disciplines, out of the realm of the peer review processes that control the creation of institutional knowledge, and maintain an attachment to the scientific method. The value of investigating a subject outside disciplinary boundaries is not contested : an intellectual initiative creates the possibilities for its own development.

This is why we must be interested in these conditions of knowledge production based on the questions that arise from the field as the social locus of lived experience and which must be described, analysed and shared. This goes hand in hand with another type of reflection, this time internal to scientific communities : the demand for transdisciplinarity in research and in all scientific endeavours, in the name of academic freedom.

There can thus be a junction between the dynamics of knowledge production outside the academy and critical currents within the academy. We then find ourselves at the crossroads of economic and political precariousness, social and cognitive experimentation, and critical reflection in science.

3 Transdisciplinarity and critical thinking in science

In the past, "science rebels" such as Paul Feyerabend (1975) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), to name but a few, have denounced the rigidity and peer review mechanisms in the scientific method of knowledge production as not only "the fundamental intellectual crisis of our time" (Bernstein 1983 :xi), but also the reason for an alarming sacralization of science in the hands of a privileged academic elite. This sacralization concerns science that occurs under strict institutional and disciplinary control.

If we accept that knowledge is continuously in a state of flux, strongly influenced by changing cultures and dominant ideologies, this idea immediately comes into conflict with the scientific obstinacy to "be correct", with the opportunistic will to control the course of things to the (own) advantage of institutions, or with the very idea of relativism.

Fully discipline-based theories are regularly challenged by a number of scholars because of their conformism, blind acceptance of dominant paradigms, excessive deference to academic (and often political) authority, and the asphyxiation of disciplinary specialization and the methodologies it prescribes and recognizes. Disciplinary specialization reinforces the existing by imposing, through conventional methodologies, standardized behaviours, and thus a dangerous insensitivity to the principle of aca-

demic freedom. We readily acknowledge that the academic world is governed by the repeated reference to a "disciplinary unity of action", an action that requires the academic world to be oriented towards a determined strategic direction. Academics must constantly and repeatedly point to a validated "plan of action" within a discipline (including its methodologies) in order to achieve results (predictable and even often requested in advance in the call for proposal procedures) acceptable within the discipline.

Breaking down barriers by envisaging knowledge creation concretely as an open, experimental and dialogical enterprise, therefore implies taking some risks, which are willingly assumed collectively by the members of the group we form.

Indeed, our group takes seriously the challenge of breaking the disciplinary impasse by moving towards knowledge creation beyond institutional frameworks, notably by adopting a transdisciplinary approach to research. Only when academic boundaries are transgressed can we hope to create new knowledge. Since Thomas Kuhn (1962) challenged the research world to transgress specific scientific paradigms (and normative approaches), the door has been open to challenge truth, and 'normal' science, with creative approaches. A paradigm shift provides an imagination and a framework for breaking away from scientific practice rooted in the disciplines, laws, theories, applications and instruments that bind researchers, all bound to the same rules and standards acceptable for the maintenance of a particular tradition of scientific research.

4 Precariousness : a condition requiring a paradigm shift

While the world of science and the humanities (especially philosophy) has never existed in isolation, it could be argued that the relationship between science and society has entered a new phase because of the emphasis on technology, the environmental crisis and the impasses of capitalism, which are undermining the ideas of progress and universalism. Science alone is no longer able to explain nature sufficiently, nor is it sufficient to explain the alienation and destructive actions suffered and developed by societies on a global scale. What is happening has become so enigmatic that we need more meaningful frameworks for understanding, on the one hand, a natural world that can no longer be definitively reduced to a backdrop and a set of objects convertible into resources, and, on the other hand, the conditions of social instability that challenge our prospects of living together in a common world.

Numerous works question the inability of human societies to feel connected to nature, and the consequences of this atrophy and loss of consistency of the very notion of culture, which implies a living environment. The Anthropocene, as example, appears as a paradigm, as a new imaginary, and as such calls for theoretical renewal.

We are witnessing a possible convergence between a philosophical reflection on the ways of apprehending reality. A recognition of how knowledge practices, attached to the living environment and the epistemological foundation of the social sciences, are at the heart of inquiry.

However, we must recall here that there are different conceptions of transdisciplinarity depending on whether one considers that there is a legitimate position to formulate a general or universal problem (which maintains the perspective of a common world through a common problem, at the price of reaffirming a legitimate position to do so). Or that one abandons the pretension of defining the common global problem and to assume a plurality of ways of posing problems in some situation (which constitutes a real problem), or a simple approach reducible to techniques ("the transdisciplinary approach" requested in the calls for projects).

Let us recall, for example, the Zurich approach to transdisciplinarity, identified by Sue McGregor (2015), which refers to collective imperatives linking science, democracy, the human sciences and economics. The aim is to promote an integration of approaches in order to focus on solving common problems within the science-technology-society triad. Re-configuring and re-contextualising existing and available knowledge in a socially responsible and reflective form can be linked to reflections and work on science communication practices. This proposal presupposes the existence of consensual and legitimate positions that "save" the recognition of science, politics, and economics as our common problems.

Other proposals start from a scientific experience situated from the conceptualization of the relationship to reality or from inquiry. Basarab Nicolescu (2002) believes that in order to overcome the disappearance of what makes up culture, it is necessary to go beyond the restrictive sphere of disciplines in order to create new knowledge. One way to do this is to engage simultaneously with the different levels of reality made up of three different axioms : the ontological, the logical and the complex. The ontological axiom refers to what we experience as nature and the relationship between mode of knowledge and nature, which then requires a logical axiom to organize the passage from one level of reality to the other, in order to achieve the complex ontology of trying to understand reality or the perception of complex structures that exist "all at the same time". Alfonso Montuori (in Volckman 2009) considers transdisciplinarity as an inquiry-based (rather than disciplinary) approach to research to connect to situated knowledge practices and link the observer to what is observed. This opens up a multitude of new concerns such as values, ethics, inclusion, social justice and a renewed appreciation of hermeneutics (which refers to the circularity inherent in any understanding where understanding can only be achieved through tacit prior knowledge) and the linking of theory to practice (praxis).

Hester du Plessis (2013), also argues that transdisciplinarity is central in societies that seek to address social pathologies of oppression of the mind, linked for example to the negative forces of colonization and globalization. Transdisciplinarity is essential in societies where the colonial legacies of the past need to be revisited and reshaped in relation to the present and its own demands.

Consequently, the policy of knowledge production has an impact on the imaginary reconstruction of a society disrupted by structural inequalities and disempowerment. The histories and institutions of knowledge production must be questioned in order to adjust their parameters to real prospects for transformation. This proposal makes

it possible to re-articulate the global evolution of knowledge and the recognition of situated knowledge.

Moreover, as we have said, reflection on transdisciplinarity is linked to the question of the communication of scientific knowledge between disciplines, between scientists and with the public. Max-Neef (2005) accounts for the complexity of communication issues by asserting that the increasing breakdown in communication is, to a large extent, the product of the exacerbation of rational thinking that is now contested in science and considered as reductionism, historically situated. We may recall here Baudouin Jurdant's questioning of the unthought-out nature of scientific communication, and in particular his call for the decolonization of ignorance (Jurdant, 2007), to take seriously *a priori* points of view on science that do not adopt disciplinary frameworks and languages. Jurdant thus put forward, as early as 1972, his own cognitive precariousness as the basis for a renewed questioning of science.

To conclude this introduction, let us return to the way in which precariousness intervenes in our proposal : it is the impossibility of considering it as an autonomous phenomenon that could be studied from the outside that is our starting point. Precariousness is linked to multiple transformations, which affect all societies and the living world. It is therefore an element that comes into play in the reflection on the apprehension of reality, and on the conditions for the production of knowledge that has a common relevance.

There has long been critical reflection within the sciences in favour of the exercise of openness and real academic freedom against the consensual blindness of the professional community. There is also a continuous reflection on the conceptions of scientificity based on the knowledge of inquiry and on the recognition of knowledge located inside and outside academia. Finally, there are experiments and work on transdisciplinarity as a means for societies and their universities that have experienced the violence of oppression, colonization or exploitation to reappropriate their own transformation. It is these elements that we put to the common fund by the construction of a common space of reflection and investigation on and from the links between knowledge and precariousness.

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