Geoforum xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Expertise in the age of post-factual politics: An outline of reflexive strategies

Trine Villumsen Berling[a,*], Christian Bueger[b]

[a] Centre for Advanced Security Theory (CAST), Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, CSS - Oester Farimagsgade 5, 1353 Kbh K, Denmark
[b] The Department of Politics and International Relations, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Practical reflexivity
Post-factual politics
Gramsci
Bourdieu
Rorty

ABSTRACT

What has become known as post-factual politics poses particular challenges to the role of expertise, calling for a new type of reflexivity able to inform scholarly strategies towards policy. Taking recent literature on the 'practice turn' as our point of departure, we argue for introducing a sense of 'practical reflexivity' that can provide guidance for the practice of scholars. Practical reflexivity focuses on the everyday practices of scholars rather than epistemic ideals or formal methodological rules. It directs our attention to the relation between academic and other practices. At this conjunction, several practical challenges arise. We discuss three major challenges and identify them as the epistemic, the autonomy and the performativity dilemmas. To seek answers to these, we explore the repertoire provided by three reflexive strategies outlined in neo-Gramscianism, Bourdieusian praxeology and pragmatism. The outcome is a tool for rethinking the relation between everyday practices of scholars and non-scholarly practices that may be usefully adopted in the current situation.

1. Introduction

'Post-truth society' and 'post-factual politics' have become buzzwords used to describe the current shifting relations between scientific knowledge and politics. 'Post-truth' became the Oxford English Dictionary's international word of the year in 2016 following, not least, the US presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum in the UK, which saw prominent politicians scorn not only commonly held assumptions, but also science itself. While earlier definitions of post-truth included 'after the truth was known', the new use of the term came to signify an appeal to emotions rather than to objective facts.[1] 'Post-factual politics' in today's parlance is closely related to claims of the advent of a post-truth society. It emphasizes the weakness of factual, science-based explanations in the face of strong narratives or a compelling story.

The proliferation of these terms signals a fundamental shift in how scientific expertise informs political decision-making, and points to a new form of devaluation of scientific expertise. The new situation demands alternative forms of reflection on how to relate to practical politics, which is the objective of this article.

It is useful to contextualize the current shift. Historically, the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by technocratic visions in which science was able to steer, engineer and give direction to political decision-making. Such rosy visions were quickly dismissed, however, as technocratic ideas were challenged and replaced by the integration of empirical and normative questions (Fischer, 1990). With the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), the road was paved for dismissing universal truths. Postmodern thinking gradually undermined the idea that science can provide absolute certainties up through the 1990s (Innerarity, 2013), and contextual truths were prioritized over universal ones. So while spin, branding, social media, and the internet have been held responsible for the advent of the post-truth society in which post-factual politics thrive, postmodernism and critical theory have also been blamed. Arguments about contextual truths seem to resonate with new claims to a post-truth society or the advent of post-factual politics. In other words, it would seem that previous epistemological debates within the sciences have entered the practical world.

The introduction of postmodernism did not initially lead to a general devaluation of scientific expertise, however. The idea that we are moving towards knowledge societies prevailed (Stehr, 1994, 2000, 2010; Knorr Cetina, 2001), and science kept setting an agenda of evidence-based policymaking (Clarence, 2002; Cairney, 2016). What, then, are we to make of the new trends? To what extent can we, as scientists, navigate the current environment in which expertise and scientific evidence seem to be rejected as partisan positions?

This situation demands answers. It requires a careful re-consideration of the strategies available to scholars to contribute to policy

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: tvb@cast.ku.dk (T.V. Berling), buegercm@cardiff.ac.uk (C. Bueger).

[1] "Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" Oxford English Dictionary, 2016.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.05.008
Received 27 May 2016; Received in revised form 19 May 2017; Accepted 24 May 2017
0016-7185/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

making and societal decisions. In this article, we argue that such strategies can be developed on the basis of practical reflexivity. Practical reflexivity allows us to formulate necessary strategies by recognizing that scholarship is a particular form of politically relevant practice, and by zooming in on the practical relations between scholars and other actors. It also presents a reminder that the relation between science and politics has always been defined by struggle.

As Hannah Arendt argued, while there might be a singular truth in the non-political sphere, in the realm of politics truth remains in the plural, and tends to be connected to opinion (Arendt, 2005: 12). For example, global warming may be an accepted fact in the scientific sphere, but within the political one it may be considered temporal and open to debate and challenge – an "opinion among opinions" (Arendt, 2005). While post-truth and post-factual may be matching terms in contemporary politics, the relation between truth and politics is an age-old academic debate. Strategies for how to navigate this relation have not been well defined as yet; debates about reflexivity tend to focus on important epistemological and methodological issues, while practical reflexivity aims at situating scholarship in a specific practical context. It works from the assumption that science is never carried out in a vacuum, and focuses on how to best manage that situation. While not dismissing the possibility of seeking universal connections and stable findings, science itself is not universal nor stable. It is situated and constantly in flux.

As a way of structuring this argument, we discuss three strategies for performing practical reflexivity: neo-Gramscianism, Pierre Bourdieu's work, and the pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. Three central dilemmas will help us contrast the three strategies: the epistemic, the autonomy and the performativity. While broader than the current post-truth/post factual trend, the three dilemmas highlight important aspects for navigating in the new paradigm.[2]

In the following section, we briefly summarize the three central dilemmas. We then outline our understanding of practical reflexivity, before turning to social theory and substantiating three strategies for navigating in the current situation.

1.1. Dilemmas

The first dilemma we focus on is, for obvious reasons, the *epistemic dilemma*. Since the advent of modernity, scientific authority has rested on the epistemic claim that science is representative of truth and facts. The prevailing convention is that science does not occupy partisan interests or advocate distinct policies.[3] Instead, science speaks truth to power and delivers evidence and certainty upon which policy can be based. As already noted, the claim to epistemic superiority has come under pressure from different directions. Firstly, poststructuralist, constructivist and post-colonial arguments have undermined claims to objectivity and the capacity of the social sciences to produce facts. Haraway (1997: 131–138 quoted in Wainwright and Mercer, 2009: 347) even uses the term "god trick" to illuminate how one "may see from a view from nowhere and thus fall victim to thinking oneself to be godlike for looking objectively" (Wainwright and Mercer, 2009: 347).[4] Indeed, the sociology of science has been misread as an argument that science produces a tainted and political form of knowledge (Latour, 2004).

Secondly, doubts about the capacity of the social sciences to provide certainty are increasingly widespread throughout contemporary societies. Failures to predict risks or market developments or to offer convincing models of governance have cast doubt on the epistemological capacities of the sciences and their superiority. This is exacerbated in the current post-factual trend as science seems reduced to one partisan interest among others. This situation produces a dilemma: on the one hand, the certainty of scientific knowledge is still in demand, while on the other it is becoming clear that science lacks the means to produce such certainty. What, then, is the value of scientific knowledge if it cannot claim epistemic superiority? Who will listen to scientific claims if they are not grounded in some claim to truth? Where doubts about epistemic authority prevail, pressure exists to provide certain and universally valid knowledge. So how may we question truth while at the same time preserving a 'place from which to speak'?

A second pertinent dilemma arises in light of conflicting demands for increasing the social relevance of scientific knowledge on the one hand, and the need for autonomy for scientific knowledge production on the other. Autonomy is often seen as a prerequisite for systematically producing knowledge that is not tainted by social and political interests.[5] It allows the researcher to choose his or her own methodology, research questions and vocabulary even if these are not embraced by social and political actors. Autonomy can particularly be threatened in situations where research projects are funded externally and where research questions are defined *a priori*.

Full autonomy can lead to detachment and to a secluded life of irrelevance, however. The ivory tower is the cliched image of autonomous research with no relevance for the world of practice (Haukkala, 2013). It gives the researcher a certain status – at least within the scientific field – but it risks sidetracking research in practice. So how can one remain autonomous, while at the same time increasing one's relevance in a situation where scientific results are used and abused on the political stage?

The third dilemma we would like to address is the *performativity dilemma*. Scholarly utterances *perform* certain discourses and they produce certain worlds (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Smith, 2004). Counter-intuitively, this might imply that scholars help sustain or create a certain world even if they intend to criticize it or attempt to act against it. When knowledge travels beyond the academic realm, it does not do so as a fixed package, which would entail rules for its usage. Knowledge is translated in distinct situations.[6] It is interpreted in light of the demands of specific contexts, which always carries the possibility or risk of misrepresentation, misinterpretation or even abuse. This leads us to ponder the question of how one can avoid enforcing what one tries to avoid. Is it possible to make theory 'safe'? Or is the best alternative to stay silent? And – as the other horn of the dilemma – how one may legitimize *not* studying a phenomenon and engage in counter-performativity.

These problems are dilemmas in the sense that they present the researcher with the choice of two (or more) alternatives, none of which are favorable. Universal truth as an objective cannot be rejected and embraced at the same time; one cannot (easily) produce relevant knowledge while maintaining full autonomy; any utterance has performative consequences, and silence is no option. The relevance and detailed character of the dilemmas will differ among different actors and situations. Identifying them is a way to trigger reflexivity in everyday practice and starting a process of devising strategies for addressing the dilemmas.

In this article, we argue that practical reflexivity is a method of *coping* with these dilemmas. But it does not provide an optimal solution or best practice. As we will demonstrate, social theory holds promise for devising coping strategies for a time of post-factual politics. Based on three distinct strategies (Gramsci's organic intellectual, Bourdieu's

[2] Certainly, there are other major challenges and dilemmas. These includes, for instance, the growing economic pressure of neo-liberal managerialism and the commercialized university (as discussed in Anderson, 2008, or Nowotny et al., 2002).

[3] For a discussion, see Tickner and Tsygankov (2008) and Hoppe (1999).

[4] See also Harding (1991) for another striking feminist reading of objectivity and science.

[5] Compare Merton (1973). For a discussion see Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) and Bourdieu (2004).

[6] The different effects of academic knowledge have been increasingly documented: research becomes employed in political controversy (Ish-Shalom, 2009; Parmar, 2013; Kaufmann, 2004). It triggers self-fulfilling or self-negating prophecies: Oren (2006). It also has performative effects: Smith (2004).

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073306

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/5073306

Daneshyari.com