

3. The Complex Discursivity of Global Futures in the Making

Reiner Keller

RC33 Logic and Methodology in Sociology

Introduction

The third ISA Forum in Vienna (July 2016) was titled “The Futures We Want; Global Sociology and the Struggles for a Better World.” Whilst wondering if—and in fact doubting that—there is such a thing as “global sociology,” I would like to address in the following a core element implied in this title: the role of knowledge and knowledge-making in the global age, or, to be more precise, in transnational regimes of power/knowledge.¹ Arguing for futures that someone or some collectivity (and some “we”) wants, involves a kind of imagination based upon accounts of a situated past and present, as well as elaborations of future wishful states and strategies to attain them. This is all a very contested and conflictual terrain, a field of struggle involving multiple actors. And all of this is about knowledge and discourse. The core argument of the following text amounts to a plea for a perspective on such processes and conflicts that is grounded in a *sociology of knowledge and discourse* and which goes beyond narrow considerations of norm making, social movement analysis, or think tank research in transnational fields.

When we discuss “global futures,” we have to account for a whole set of dimensions: *structurations* (Anthony Giddens’ term), *figurations* (Norbert Elias’ term), *imaginations* (Arjun Appadurai’s term), *practices, processes, relations of power and dominance*, etc. And to these I will add *discourses*. I refer to the various uses Michel Foucault made of this concept. There is no single definition of discourse in Foucault’s work (Keller, 2008, 2017). In his 1969 book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault conceived of discourses as practices which constitute objects (of knowledge). A few years later, in his inaugural speech at the Collège de France, he talked about *The Order of Discourse* (see both texts in Foucault, 2010).² He then discussed the multiple ways by which discourses and their institutional apparatuses determine the scarcity of speakers (by producing those allowed to speak and to be heard), the separation of the true (that which is to be known) and the false (that which is to be forgotten), the taboo (discussion of which is forbidden), or the commentary (which separates the good, the bad, and perhaps the ugly texts). And again later, in his genealogi-

cal period, he talked about discourses as fighting or competing parties in battlefields of meaning making. Here his case in point was the analysis of the Pierre Rivière murder case (Foucault, 1982).

Close to the Foucauldian tradition, the title of this paper—"The Complex Discursivity of Global Futures in the Making"—refers to discourses as processes in power/knowledge regimes, to dispositifs as devices of discourse production, and to discourse-based intervention into fields of practice. But we have to go with and beyond Foucault in order to address such complexities via empirical research. The current moment of transnational, cosmopolitan, and global processes of the discursive construction of realities is a point of transformation that cries out for discourse research. Inquiry into single-issue knowledge settings and knowledge diffusion isn't enough; such an inquiry has to be informed by a concept of discourse.

Global and transnational civil society, the proliferation of arenas and organisations involved in the definition of "world problems" and "standards making," the burgeoning economic power of the BRIC states, and the general recognition of a "post-colonial constellation" together constitute a challenging reconfiguration of transnational or global orders of discourse. The ongoing structural transformations linked to such processes are profoundly changing global social relationships of knowledge. The guiding thesis of this paper accordingly is that new transnational orders of discourse are emerging, in the making, and these are in confrontation with heterogeneous local and regional discourse histories. Established ways of evidence building and justification are no longer beyond question; indeed they are at stake. Their future "Gestalt" and shape are still widely contingent, and imply far-reaching social and political effects. In the following I will first introduce my concept of discourse, and then address the issue of transnational arenas or spaces of discourse as entry points for such research.

The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD)

Despite Michel Foucault's trailblazing contributions to discourse theory and research, he left a number of issues out of consideration. These include the questions of meaning and interpretation, the concrete work on data: How can the analyst identify the core concepts, schemes of interpretation, etc. in a discursive formation? What is the relationship between the analyst's own work of interpretation and meaning making and the meaning making present in the data she or he is dealing with? What is the role of actors and their agency in discourse production? How can we determine the co-constitutional relation between speakers as being produced by discourses, and as being those entities which perform those very same discourses, and which sometimes transform them by their interpretative practices? What theory of signs or meaning in use,

and what methodology of research might help us out of the problem we face, given that interpretation is everywhere and cannot be avoided and that researchers just produce discourses about discourses?

The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) suggests that we can elaborate on Foucauldian concepts by drawing on a broader perspective in the sociology of knowledge, namely the Berger and Luckmann tradition,³ with its close links to social phenomenology (Alfred Schütz, 1932, 1945) and to the American pragmatism of George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and others, all of whom, by the way, talked about “universes of discourse” decades before Foucault. SKAD guides inquiry into *social relations of knowledge and politics of knowledge*:⁴ How do regimes of power/knowledge come into being and with what kinds of effects for fields of practice? How are hierarchies of the realness of reality established, questioned, transformed? Which actors and knowledge claims are involved in such symbolic ordering, meaning, and world making? Knowledge herein is conceived in the Berger and Luckman (1966) tradition: It is not (only) about so-called positivist or factual knowledge. It refers to everything considered or established by someone (individual or collective) as “real.” This might be a train station, a big master narrative concerning “capitalism” or “the unconscious,” political ideologies, or religious cosmologies with their gods or devils. The term “social relations of knowledge” is an adaptation of Ulrich Beck’s idea of relations of definition. He coined this concept in his analysis of (world) risk society (Beck, 2008: 24–46). Who defines how and when, and to what effect on what counts as risks for physical health, for example, or for social life, etc.? Beck was quite clear that he referred back to Karl Marx’s idea of the “relations of production.” Not in the narrow sense of capital versus labour force, but more widely in order to account for hierarchies, power and domination, unequal distribution of resources in definition making, etc. “Social relations of knowledge” therefore address Foucauldian questions of power/knowledge regimes.

The term “politics of knowledge,” then, indicates all kind of performative processes which reproduce, challenge, or transform relationships of knowledge. A good example is the pope, who recently gave a new role to women in the Catholic liturgy. This is some kind of macro strategy of reality re-construction, with global reach. When this news was broadcast in Germany, the female news-reader on TV added some micro-politics of her own, by presenting this momentous news with a mildly ironic smile.

I will not enter into further details of SKAD here. This has been done and will be done elsewhere (in German and in English). Let me just restate that it is a theory-methods package, or to be more precise: a theory of what this object of inquiry, discourse could be; what heuristic toolbox is useful to account for it, what methodology it implies, and what methods we could use to do research (see Keller, 2011a, 2011b, 2013).

Transnational orders and arenas of discourse

Up to now social sciences discourse research has all too often followed some kind of “methodological nationalism”; that is, it has looked for discourses in a specific nation-state container (the British discourse on nuclear energy, the German discourse on climate change) or has done some kind of comparative study (e.g., between British and German discourses on nuclear energy). This is not a problem per se; it is even needed, because media-scapes and language-scapes differ, and nation-state governments are sites for social problem debates, rule making, and so forth. But such a focus neglects a discursive sphere which has emerged over the last decades: the transnationality of orders of discourse.

Due to the ongoing structural transformations brought about by globalisation and transnationalisation, the state of knowledge and knowledge relationships in societies and between societies is changing dramatically. The concept of *transnational orders, spaces, and arenas of discourse* explores new forms of discursive formations and interconnectivity in which social actors and assorted politics of knowledge concern themselves with the construction and problematisation, as well as the alteration and adaptation of knowledge and corresponding plans for action, going beyond and transcending national borders in the process. New transnational orders of discourse are emerging in which heterogeneous local and regional discourse histories now confront one another, reconfiguring available speaker’s positions, and readjusting knowledge relationships. Established processes of evidence and justification are not simply adapted, but indeed find themselves at risk and subject to transnational reconfiguration. The future shape of transnational spaces of discourse is highly contingent, and suggests far-reaching social and political effects.

We have to assume that in such processes and emergent structurations, complex and competing definitions of global or transnational situations meet, and these are shaped by heterogeneous cultural traditions, rationalities, cultures of the factual and of evidence and justification, as well as by unequally distributed resources of proof and fact finding. An ongoing current example is the conflict centred around the General Declaration of Human Rights and the opposing Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights set up by the European Islamic Council in 1981 or the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, supported by 57 nation states in 1990 (Favret-Saada, 2010).

Another case in point is the emergence of global assemblages. Collier and Ong (2005: 3ff.) define them as “spatial forms,” “that are nonisomorphic with standard units of analysis . . . abstractable, mobile and dynamic. As global forms are articulated in specific situations—territorialized in assemblages—they define new material, collective and discursive relationships.” Transnational orders of knowledge can be considered as emerging “singularities” which are “neither the simple expression of national or regional histories nor the product

of global circumstance, but somewhere in between” (Reid, 2005: 244). Such complex discursivities have to be analyzed “as localized, grounded, and situated temporally, spatially, historically, economically, politically, culturally, socially, and so on.” (Clarke, 2010: 389)

Within the topic of transnational spaces of discourse the following complex question is suggested: how and to what effect do social stocks of knowledge, distributions of knowledge, and knowledge policies—in other words, present-day discourse landscapes—change under the auspices of transnationalisation and globalisation? The fact that social stocks of knowledge are always very complex in character, structured at different levels of abstraction, and in social terms are also rather unequally distributed, is one of the core assumptions of modern sociology of knowledge. The *national (state) form* of knowledge also represents a specific form of the constitution of this sort of socially unequal distribution. For since their foundation, modern nation states have functioned not only as political protagonists of the imagined communities of populations that are deemed to be homogeneous; they also have functioned—and still function—as the developers, carriers, and promoters of special stocks of knowledge that are nationally specific. In this way they have attempted, on the one hand, to monitor their special nature in an international context, and on the other hand to compete, in the area of international economic competition, for better placements (for example by means of national statistics and support for science or the economy) and also to cultivate their “special forms” of socio-cultural collective identity and identification.

Already in the late-1990s Manuel Castells’ trilogy on the “information age” (Castells, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) had commented on a new immediacy between individuals and the Internet-accessible global world of knowledge in which, on the one hand, transnational expert communities and discourse formations were producing, stabilizing, and modifying “transnational knowledges” and global distributions of knowledge, and where, on the other hand, by contrast, professional knowledge was being increasingly questioned and criticized. At the same time, the recent debates on multiple types of modernity, post-colonialism, and the epistemological “provincialization of Europe” (Chakrabarty, 2007) have made it clear that we can no longer proceed on the basis of an uninterrupted westernisation of the planet and of knowledge. Of course, the historical impact of “European” knowledge formations should in no sense be denied; but because of the economic and “discursive” ascent of other regions of the world (such as the “Global South”) we can undoubtedly see that in this respect new actors are successfully entering into the relevant transnational arenas of discourse.

The concept of *transnational order, arenas and spaces of discourse* (Knaut and Keller, 2012) addresses observations such as these in a broader theoretical and methodological framework. It denotes comparatively new, trans-border

topic- or cause-specific arenas for the construction and problematisation of world-phenomena, or—to put it differently—transnational forms, fora, and arenas, in which actors and knowledge policies or knowledge production are inter-related in the form of discursive formations or discourse relationships. In this context I speak of transnational spaces of discourse in order to demonstrate that here trans-border knowledge relationships and policies are being developed, without these processes and participations necessarily having global reach, and without having to decide in advance which actors or constellations of actors are involved or what their concrete topography in a given case might look like: this may differ substantially, depending upon the particular topic. We may again speak of transnational discourse spaces in order to emphasize the fact that the corresponding arenas, their institutionalisations, the participating actors, and the discursive positions being represented all contribute to constructing and following specific structures (establishing a kind of “field-logic”).

For concrete examples of such discursive structurations, we may refer to the global warming debate, to worldwide competition in education, to financial regulation, war against terrorism, citizens’ engagements across the planet, the development of global social and health care policies, or the global arenas of art production and circulation (ranging from blockbuster movies to literature, painting, etc.; see Appadurai, 1996). In such processes, it should be assumed that we cannot talk per se of general involvements in globalisation, but that we may observe variously constituted networks and sites of discursive struggles which may be differently structured according to a particular topic. That is to say, they may comprise widely differing types of participation, scope, arenas, orders of discourse, and so on.

Such orders are complex configurations, which imply a huge range of dimensions, shaped by the cases of concern. Please allow me to mention just a few:

- different nation-state— or local culture—based universes of discourse meet;
- heterogeneous fields of conflict and consent, as well as more or less connected networks of interaction, entities, and forms of cosmopolitisation confront each other;
- the confrontation of rationalities of knowledge cultures, shaped by religious or secular traditions, democratic or autocratic/authoritarian political regimes;
- the hybrid melange of professional expertise/experts, and a heterogeneous range of actors in making knowledge claims (as NGOs, indigenous people movements, local actor movements, etc.);
- the urgent need for translation between cultures and languages (sign systems);

- a confrontation of different—for example, secular or spiritual—rationalities, with different extensions, effects, and dispersions;
- historically established hierarchies of power/knowledge regimes and language regimes, including dominant and marginalized structurations, limited possibilities of translation, as well as interpretative flexibilities in translation;
- a confrontation of different and asymmetric resources of making knowledge claims, of proving or deconstructing evidence, etc., of relationships and politics of knowledge;
- a heterogeneous constellation of regimes of visibility, of emotions, of ethics and values, of “materiality,” of combining “the factual” and its “evaluation” via “measurement.”

Conclusion

The complex discursivity of such sites and processes of discourse, communication, and knowledge production is a result of the hybrid constellations of the actors and knowledge claims involved, interconnections of heterogeneous arenas of dialogue and negotiation, diverse cultural rationalities of factuality, evidence, and legitimation, and also of translation between epistemic cultures and languages from around the world. Such current (re-)orderings of discourse largely differ from the global formations of discourse established in the last centuries. In order to address these current challenges, we have to develop sociological tools for analysing transnational and global discourses as knowledge-making activities which will profoundly shape the global future.

Notes

1. This paper is my Vienna talk presented in Common Session 2a, Tuesday, 12 July 2016, 17:45–19:15. For an extended version see *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology*, Autumn 2016.
2. This was translated into English as *The Discourse on Language*.
3. Please note that this is not the narrow idea of sociology of scientific knowledge predominant in Anglo-Saxon contexts (and sciences & technology studies, or standpoint epistemologies inspired by Karl Mannheim).
4. SKAD has been established since the late 1990s and up to today has been guiding a wide range of discourse research in education, political science, sociology, and others, mostly in German contexts, and increasingly in Anglo-Saxon work too (see for more references, <http://kellersskad.blogspot.de/p/blog-page.html>; last accessed August 2, 2016).

Literature

- Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beck, Ulrich (2008) *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Berger, Peter L., and Luckmann, Thomas (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Castells, Manuel (2009a [1996]) *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel (2009b [1997]) *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. II*. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel (2010 [1998]) *End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. III*. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2007) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Clarke, Adele E. (2010) 'Thoughts on Biomedicalization in Its Transnational Travels.' In: Adele E. Clarke, Laura Mamo, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, Jennifer R. Fishman and Janet K. Shim (Eds.): *Biomedicalization. Technoscience, Health, and Illness in the U.S.* Durham/London: Duke University Press, pp. 380–406.
- Collier, Stephen J. and Ong, Aiwah (2005) 'Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems.' In: Aiwah Ong and Stephen J. Collier (Eds.): *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. London: Blackwell, pp. 3–21.
- Favret-Saada, Jeanne (2010) *Jeux d'ombres sur la scène de l'ONU*. Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier.
- Foucault, Michel (1982) *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*. Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- Foucault, Michel (2010) [1969/1974] *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Keller, Reiner (2008) *Michel Foucault*, Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz.
- Keller, Reiner (2011a) *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogrammes*. 3. Aufl. Wiesbaden: SpringerVS [English translation in prep. with Springer, to be published in 2017].
- Keller, Reiner (2011b) 'The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD).' *Human Studies*, 34 (1) pp. 43–65.
- Keller, Reiner (2013) *Doing Discourse Research*. London: Sage.
- Keller, Reiner (2017) 'Michel Foucault.' In: Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Fortchner (Eds.): *Handbook of Language and Politics*. London: Routledge (forthcoming).
- Knaut, Annette, and Keller, Reiner (2012) 'Die Entstehung transnationaler Diskursräume durch die Europäische Bürgerinitiative.' *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen*, Vol. 25, No. 4: pp. 37–47.
- Reid, Roddey (2005): *Globalizing Tobacco Control. Anti-smoking Campaigns in California, France, and Japan*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Schütz, Alfred (1967 [1932]) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Schütz, Alfred (1973 [1945]) 'On Multiple Realities.' In: Alfred Schütz, *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*. Ed. by Maurice Natanson. Den Haag: Nijhoff, pp. 207–259.