

Weak Knowledge: Forms, Functions, and Dynamics

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Traditionally, (scientific) knowledge has been, and still is, regarded to be a very strong cultural form. On most accounts, be they historical, philosophical, or sociological, (scientific) knowledge is conceived to be an epistemically strong form of human cognition, tied to strong social institutions, and coupled to important practical implications. It can even be argued that most if not all ideals of (scientific) knowledge that have been articulated at different times and in different places go together with the articulation of a hierarchy of more or less deficient forms of knowing or believing against which “real” knowledge is placed at the top. (The term “scientific” is put in brackets throughout since the notion and demarcation of “science” – or one of its counterparts in other languages – is part and parcel of the problem at hand.)

On the other hand, we have learned from a wealth of studies that at least many (perhaps even most or all) bodies and fragments of (scientific) knowledge that we encounter in history have been marked by such deficiencies – be they epistemic, social, or practical. Moreover, articulations of, discourses on, or fights about such perceived weaknesses have been and still are part and parcel of knowledge cultures of all periods. In fact, they did and do play a significant role in the historical dynamics of (scientific) knowledge.

With the conference we would like to bring together scholars working on all epochs and a wide variety of (scientific) fields and cultures who are interested in reflecting critically on the role of “weakness” – in any of the possible senses – in the dynamics of (scientific) knowledge. We hope to develop together some elements of an analytical perspective on the issue.

To this purpose, we propose to take as a starting point the insight that ideals and types of knowledge are both varied and variable in time and place, and that most if not all of these are tied to implicit or explicit hierarchies of strength and weakness of knowledge. The tension between strong ideals and fragile realities of systems and fragments knowledge constitutes an essential element of the historical and cultural dynamics of knowledge. There are several dimensions of the forms, functions and dynamics of knowledge perceived to be weak at different times and in different places. A preliminary distinction, to be discussed and refined during the conference, of these dimensions includes epistemic, social, and practical issues – which themselves may be combined or configured in different ways. Moreover, besides ascriptions of weakness to bodies or fragments of knowledge, many societies (including our own) are marked by a discourse on the *relative* strength or weakness of knowledge systems compared to other material or immaterial resources of the same society.

Specific topics we would like to explore, or to take up under a new comparative perspective, during the conference include:

Demarcation of scientific/non-scientific knowledge. Obviously, the insistence on a strong ideal of scientific knowledge has the consequence of denying that weak forms of knowing can claim to be scientific (or to be forms of knowledge at all). Can the earlier debates in science studies on the demarcation problem be refined by introducing a more gradualist notion of weakness or strength of knowledge – relative to given, variable ideals of knowledge?

Negotiating hierarchies within scientific culture and within individual sciences. In much the same way, relative hierarchies between and within individual disciplines are negotiated on the basis of ascriptions of strength and weakness to bodies and fragments of knowledge. Are there common patterns of how these ascriptions are mobilized and exploited to change scientific culture?

Knowledge without strong institutional basis. Many modern scientific institutions rely on strong social or economic support. What about bodies of knowledge emerging without the support of strong institutions, e.g. in “weak states” (ancient or modern) or lacking economic support? In a wider sense, the institutional basis of knowledge includes cultures of things, rituals, etc. To what extent may a perceived weakness of knowledge depend on problems arising on this level?

Socially weak knowledge actors. Can an analysis of the dynamic role played by a weak social position of knowledge actors help to advance our understanding of the dynamics of knowledge in colonial contexts, or in social and political hierarchies? How is it coupled to the negotiation of the status of knowledge “supported” by the colonizers or by hegemonic groups?

Migrating knowledge. Migrants are often (though not always) in a particularly weak position within the culture to which they come. The knowledge they bring thus often has weak cultural support and may be perceived as strange or foreign. On the other hand, it may have a substantial dynamical impact on the receiving culture for that very reason.

Knowledge with weak empirical or rational grounding. In the epistemic dimension, discourses of strength and weakness of knowledge claims may be said to belong to the bread and butter of scientific life, on all levels: theory, experiment, and instrumentation. What is the dynamical role played by the articulation of weaknesses on any of these levels?

The fragility of material procedures of knowledge production. The long debate on the material culture of science has taught us to be aware of the fragility of most material practices involved in the production of knowledge. At the same time, the role played by knowledge in material practices is equally fragile. What are the dynamical effects of this fragility in the various connections between knowledge and material practices?

Knowledge as a scarce resource. How do societies act when knowledge is lacking in a particular area? Can bodies of knowledge, essential for the function of a given society, be strategically weakened, strengthened or substituted in similar ways as other kinds of resources? Can the undermining of knowledge by doubt or the production of ignorance be compared to the artificial production of scarcity in other domains?

Weak knowledge regimes. A number of authors have pointed out that societies are structured by varying large scale *regimes* of the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge. Not all of these are equally stable, in particular during transitory periods. Knowledge regimes involve a substantial amount of dynamical elements, and some social configurations depend on the interaction of different regimes of knowledge. What are the dynamical roles played by weaknesses, and diagnoses of weakness, on the level of knowledge regimes and their various elements?