

9-2012

Restructuring Science, Reengaging Society

Danielle L. Lake

Grand Valley State University, lakeda@gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_articles

Recommended Citation

Lake, Danielle L., "Restructuring Science, Reengaging Society" (2012). *Faculty Peer Reviewed Articles*. 4.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lib_articles/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Peer Reviewed Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Danielle L. Lake
Michigan State University
Lakedan2@msu.edu

Restructuring Science, Reengaging Society:
A Response to Paul Rabinow's "How to Submit to Inquiry: Dewey and Foucault"

In *Anthropos Today* Paul Rabinow's purpose was to "assemble a toolkit of concepts in order to advance inquiry" (2). A good portion of his subsequent work shares this same goal of advancing an experimental mode, especially within the human sciences. In "How to Submit to Inquiry: Dewey and Foucault," Rabinow says, "... my experiments and inquiries support the claim that scientifically and ethically, relations among and between the life sciences, human sciences, and ethics require sustained re-thinking and re-working" (2012, 6). Science, as it is structured and practiced, is insufficient to our complex endeavors. When asked to consider what science gives to society, Rabinow's answer is tools for thought (2003, 101-2). Scientists are one of the very few who have the authority in our society to speak "the truth." When considering why they have such power, we see that we are heavily dependent on their specialized abilities. It is further disheartening that today more and more information is constantly generated, yet not articulated or disseminated in a fitting format. ¹ Thus, we saw in *Anthropos Today* that the way scientific information attempts to fit into our lives is problematic. In Rabinow's most recent work, he leaves the reconstruction of our life sciences as "an open question, a pressing problem as well as a site of discordancy and indeterminacy" (2012, 7). To this end, it is my goal to suggest for our consideration various ways in which the sciences are being re-thought, and thus, some possible ways forward in this reconstruction. I leave it to the reader to decide whether such challenges to the "near future" are reformulating current "blockages and opportunities as problems" or taking them as a given (2012, 9).

Bridge Concepts

Bryan Norton, an environmental pragmatist, suggests one of the major problems with our various scientific disciplines today is the towering occurring within these disciplines. Towering is, he says, most often associated with an "obsessive insistence on a sharp separation of science and values" along with a separation between the gathering of information from the policy processes (33). Towering is both the reason why we rarely engage one another across disciplinary boundaries *and* why we often fail to really understand one another when we do. In line with Norton's point, Charlene Siegfried writes that disciplines are narrowly strategic and "strategic thinking becomes dangerous to the extent that it is not guided by more encompassing purposes" (Siegfried 38). Rabinow highlights this form of towering in *The Accompaniment* by reminding us that the audience for research papers is really only other researchers in one's own subspecialty; this is obviously the opposite of seeking a wider, public audience (2011, 185). *Anthropos Today* underlines this claim by highlighting the fact that different "interpretative communities" rarely ever pay attention to one another. In the end, towering blocks discordant

information from influencing one's beliefs and thus prevents true learning (Norton 34). One solution here is the creation of what Norton calls *bridge concepts*. Bridge concepts have empirical, measurable descriptive content and connect us back to our social values. Obesity is a bridge concept usefully employed in relation to our health (Norton 39). Bridge terms can, despite beliefs to the contrary, carry social value *and* be used with some amount of precision. Without bridge terms we as a citizenry tend to be left with a lot of "precise information," but little idea about what to do with it. Norton's bridge concepts, then, look like they work to "make the relations between *logos* and *ethos* apparent" and a part of our "way of life" (Rabinow, 2012, 9). Norton then suggests experts need to "learn from the public discourse" and to guide their "research toward questions that really matter in policy choices" (34).

Thus we see that one of the most striking reasons why science fits so poorly into our lives is because of the frequent attempts to separate science and values. This is inherently problematic in pragmatism not least because our knowledge is intrinsically guided by our values; it is a mistake to separate the two. "Expectations, values, and beliefs," Siegfried reminds us, "are already part of any experimental situation" (152). In the end, "there is no wholly neutral or value-free inquiry" (Shrader-Frchette, 2002, 194). The mistake is not that values are present, but that we fail to examine which values are present and to consider whether they are the right or the wrong ones. Even worse, we at times work to mask such ethical assumptions in our speaking and writing. If, on the other hand, we were attentive to such value judgments, we could acknowledge how they have influenced our conclusions. It may even be the case that we can avoid some values, but in order to do so we need to be critically aware of them. Kristin Shrader-Frchette, an environmental philosopher, distinguishes between bias values, contextual values, and constitutive values. While bias values (misinterpretations or omissions of data) can be avoided, contextual values are more difficult, and constitutive values are in fact impossible to avoid. This is because research is always restricted by some kind of incomplete information and scientists cannot evade value judgments when they move to use one methodological rule over another (1991, 41). Even when deciding on what data to use and what to ignore, value is present. As Rabinow said, understanding is a conceptual, but also a political and ethical practice.

Restructuring Relationships, Restructuring Thought

Frank Fischer echoes these concerns; values, he says, are far too often hidden within the research process itself (42). Like Rabinow here, Fischer diagnoses the problem within an increasingly technocratic – Rabinow uses the word 'autocratic' – society; this is especially true for the "practitioners of the life sciences and their medical colleagues" (Rabinow, 2003, 118). Fischer goes further by claiming experts are far too often in the employ of the elite and sometimes generate specific data upon request.

By virtue of the professional's middle-level position in the societal hierarchy – that is, between management and labor, government and citizen – he or she typically tends to adopt the system's own definitions of its problems (31).

On top of this we also need to remember that, “without interpretation, the data carried by the increasing flows of information are as meaningless as they are overwhelming” (Fischer, 13). In contrast to the constant influx of information, we see fewer and fewer citizens directly involved in the complex social problems we face today. Fischer, like Shrader-Frchette, also maintains that expertise is not neutral. In fact, today it is often the case that experts do not actually have solutions to the wicked problems we face.² Instead, expert solutions too commonly turn out to cause greater problems. A solution lies in restructuring the relationship between citizen and expert. Fischer reasserts Norton's concern that “technical languages provide an intimidating barrier for lay citizens” (23). These insights confirm Michel Foucault's point that power is diversely decentralized. Power, a la Dewey, is built into our habits. Removing or restructuring various institutions is not enough to displace current structures; we need to address our own habits as well. Thus, a key way to really change things is not simply, as Rabinow says, by changing “society or culture or power,” but by changing our thought (2011, 66). This leads Fischer to the conclusion that we require localized resistance, local knowledges (27). He, in fact, argues experts need citizens far more than their “professional ideologies have acknowledged” (35).

Democratic Deliberation

In contrast to such a technocracy, “citizen participation, defined as deliberation on issues affecting one's own life, is the normative core of democracy” (Fischer 1). Opportunities for participation and deliberation are, in actuality, what is most pressing and missing in this country (Fischer, 35). To this end, perhaps democratic deliberation is a means by which we can meliorate current problems. In *Marking Time* Rabinow wrote, “no contemporary moral debates of any import have been resolved through disputation and argumentation alone” (2008 79). But he, at the same time, acknowledged this does not mean nothing significant is happening here. Such participation could, in fact, help citizens see 1) that scientists are really also lay people in relation to policy and social judgments and 2) that more science and technology cannot always solve our problems given how often “scientific technologies are themselves a cause” of these problems (Fischer 53). John Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems*, also focused on how a public could cope with the wicked problems of a modern, technologically obsessed society, pointing out the dual growth of both the rights of our citizens and the large corporate machine with a focus on technical expertise. For Dewey, the solution is to work further on the methods of deliberation and the conditions by which we can make this more possible. The expert's role in such a society is in facilitating greater understanding of such a complex world for its citizens. Instead, experts have very much separated themselves. We need our social institutions to help “...remove the barriers that hinder or impede the shift of information from institutions to

individual citizens” (Fischer, 11). Anthropology, Rabinow complains, is not reaching wide audiences and -- most often -- neither is science or philosophy. In *Marking Time* he ask us to consider how to create these audiences, “how to invent forms to ‘influence, instruct or outrage them?’” (2008, 37). Perhaps, one way to reconnect citizens and scientists is through advocacy research where we explicitly connect research to our own interests and concerns in our various communities and to the debate about future policy changes (Fischer, 38). In the end, Fischer’s arguing that “the standard practitioner-client model must give way to a more democratic relationship” (39-40). And Democratic Deliberation, if we can get citizens to the table, does seem to engage and empower them. The question I am currently most concerned with is Rabinow’s own: how can -- and how should -- we engage our citizens in the most pressing problems of our time?

That is, how do we get others to recognize there is a need for inquiry here? Perhaps Jane Addams provides us with a way in; Addams says, “the mass of men seldom move together without an emotional incentive” (Addams 119). Emotional incentive, combined with a dose of uncertainty about the best way forward, opens the space for “an ethics to become a practice of inquiry rather than a discourse of values and expertise” (Rabinow, 2011, 175). As Dewey says, the predetermined state of mind is “... the chief obstacle to the kind of thinking which is the indispensable prerequisite of steady, secure and intelligent social reforms...” (MW: 15, 76). Effectively engaging an individual that has already made a determination about the matter under examination requires us to bring to her awareness components of the situation she had yet to consider, thus causing the puzzlement noted above. Oversimplifying the reality of our very serious problems or finding ourselves ignorant of the concerns of others allows individuals to avoid such complex and puzzling problems. As Rabinow said, “problematizing previously taken-for-granted apparatuses makes it clear that other modes and forms are possible and at least potentially feasible. For them to be actualized, however, requires not only rethinking but equally a corrosion of the power relations embedded in the *habitus* of a generation” (2008, 53-4). Perhaps one way we can begin to corrode such power relations is by situating knowledge. Doing so, Iris Marion Young tells us, “can both pluralize and relativize hegemonic discourses, and offer otherwise unspoken knowledge to contribute to wise decisions” (Young 7).

In the end, regress – Dewey cautioned us – is just as much a possibility as progress. I hope only to have succeeded in suggesting *possible* moves forward, potential pathways, for our mutual consideration, both towards reconstructing and reconnecting the discordant divisions within the academy and broader society.

1. By fitting, I mean in a way that impacts our understanding of the issue, that brings to light the scientific, political and ethical issues surrounding the topic under examination.
2. Wicked problems are those not easily solved by professionals alone. This term was coined by city planners, Horst Rittel and Melvin Weber, in a 1973 article entitled, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.”

Work Cited

- Addams, Jane. *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Print.
- Dewey, John. *Logical Method and Law, 1899-1924*, Vol. 15. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1983 [1923]. Print.
- . *The Public and Its Problems. The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 2. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984 [1927]. 235-351. Print.
- Fischer, Frank. *Citizens, Experts and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*, part I. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 5-86, 2000. Print.
- Norton, Bryan G. *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.
- Rabinow, Paul. *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment*. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print.
- . "How to Submit to Inquiry: Dewey and Foucault." Coss Dialogue. *Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy Annual Meeting, March 16, 2012, New York City*. The Pluralist, 2012. Print.
- . *Marking Time: on the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.
- . *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.
- Rittel, Horst W. J., and Melvin M. Webber. "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4 1973: 155-169. Print.
- Shrader-Frechette, Kristin. *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.
- . *Risk and Rationality: Philosophical Foundations for Populist Reforms*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. Print.

Siegfried, Charlene Haddock. *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Print.

Young, Iris. *Inclusion and Democracy*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.