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Politics of Knowledge

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Abstract

This article addresses the question: ‘what is knowledge, and whose knowledge counts?’

The premise is that power and knowledge are inextricably linked.

At different times, and representing different cultural eras, philosophers, church leaders, scientists, politicians and owners of big business have been influential in shaping ideas about knowledge.

Following a brief overview of premodernism, modernism and postmodernism as successive cultural eras, I explore in greater depth the intricate relationship between knowledge and power in contemporary society. This reveals a creeping authoritarianism, grounded in a neoliberal ideology which has increasingly pervaded society over the past four decades. Any sense of being connected to a wider spiritual wisdom is excluded. There is a danger that, if this process is allowed to continue, we will enter an era where technology dominates, leading perhaps to Dr Yuval’s prediction that the elites will use their money and power to hack into and re-engineer human beings. However, there is yet hope. In these tumultuous times, where uncertainty dominates, there are the emerging seeds of a new ‘metamodern’ cultural era. I conclude by exploring the potential value of metamodernism as a form of resistance, and a means of allowing a return to the transcendent.

Introduction

‘What is knowledge?’ may sound an easy question, but its apparent simplicity is deceptive. The nature of knowledge is contestable. Throughout the ages, there have been different claims to knowledge, based on different ontological assumptions about the nature of reality. Philosophy, religion and science have all been, and continue to be, major proponents of alternative notions of ‘truth’, with each being the dominant influence during a particular period of time.

In recent decades, though, as a consequence of global communication and travel, there has grown an awareness of the plurality of cultures, and the realisation that what counts as knowledge varies considerably. This has created uncertainty, leading to a questioning as to whether objective knowledge is possible, or whether, in fact, it is always relative to the perspective of the knower.

While this debate rages on in academic circles, the sense of confusion has created a vacuum, which has proven useful to those who want to insert their version of truth. It is within this context that the relationship between power and knowledge has been illuminated.

I trace this evolving relationship, initially through different historical cultural eras, then in more depth, in contemporary society. I argue that, up to the mid-twentieth century, power was generally given to those seen to hold knowledge, including at different times, philosophers, church leaders and scientists. However, in the last four decades, the introduction of a neoliberal ideology into our political world, the growth of big business, and the influence of the media, has led to a situation where those who have the power determine what counts as knowledge. Led by the UK government, closely followed by the USA and other western governments, the spread of neoliberalism has been rapid and largely unchallenged. With its belief in the primacy of the economy as the basis for a healthy society, and its implicit adherence to a scientific materialist paradigm, there is no space for meaningful conversations about a spiritual or transpersonal worldview. There is no interest in debating the possibility that

consciousness might not be an emergent property of the brain, but instead a more fundamental, or even primary, property of the universe. This leaves organisations such as the Scientific and Medical Network on the margins, with minimal power to influence what counts as knowledge in mainstream society.

Different possibilities of what it means to be human could be explored as an integral aspect of school education, and the focus of funded research in universities. This would enable a critical evaluation of contemporary society, and an exploration of what can be done to support global human flourishing. However, both education and research are constrained by neoliberal policies, which maintain the material basis of society, and uphold the power of the minority elite.

Taking a pessimistic view, it can be seen that, if this trend continues, predictions of a dystopian future, where human behaviour is controlled by progressively sophisticated technologies, may well be realised. If the power of the few is to be challenged, there needs to be a collective endeavour to create methods of resistance. These could encourage expanded notions of reality to be introduced into mainstream education, including ideas of the spiritual and transcendent. I explore how the concept of ‘metamodernity’ might help to create a framework which allows this to happen.

Knowledge in different cultural eras

In a short article, it is not possible to provide more than a brief overview of the different cultural eras that have been influential in the development of knowledge. However, in order to present a case for consciously creating a metamodern era, it is necessary to locate its origins in context, in order to understand the evolving relationship between power and knowledge over time.

For the purposes of this argument, the evolution of society can be divided into four main cultural eras: the indigenous, premodern, modern and postmodern. The following table outlines the timescales in which these eras have been dominant, and their main characteristics.

Cultural Era	Indigenous	Traditional/ pre-modern	Modern	Postmodern
When dominant	Dawn of history to Middle Ages (5000 + years)	Middle Ages to mid-17th century (circa 1000 years)	Mid-17th to mid-20th century (circa 300 years)	1970s to early 20th century (circa 40 years)
Nature of foundational belief	Spiritual	Religious	Secular	Nihilistic
Source of knowledge	Myth	Faith	Science	Critical theories
How knowledge is communicated	Through communicating with the Spirits who uphold order	The ‘Grand Narrative’ of God’s proclamation of Truth	The ‘Grand Narrative’ of scientific assumptions and methods	‘Little’ narratives that deconstruct language and provide relative views of truth

Table 1: Cultural Eras

There is no certain knowledge as to when human beings were able to communicate fluently using language, and were forming their own ontological views about the world. Most texts would agree that this was at least 6000 years ago, and perhaps considerably longer. There is little dispute, though, that indigenous cultures existed for many thousands of years. Explanations for existence were communicated through the medium of myths, which often reflected a belief that the natural world, including humans, were interconnected, and energised by spirit.

With the introduction of the Christian Church, this holistic view of reality began to change. Church leaders proclaimed the sanctity of God, and the Bible as God’s word, to be the sole arbiter of Truth. They preached about the relationship between this world and the next, and decreed what behaviour was required if an individual were to achieve eternal joy rather than everlasting damnation. In the absence of evidence to support these beliefs, faith was required, with the fearful consequences of not faithfully following the teachings of the church. God was the all-powerful creator, and knowledge of His wishes were communicated through His earthly representatives.

The development of science in the modern era, in particular influenced by the publication of Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687, transformed the dominant view of truth. Knowledge about the universe could be proven, using evidence that was observable, quantifiable and replicable. Faith was no longer an appropriate basis for stated beliefs. As there was no proof that reality extended beyond this embodied life, there grew an increasing scepticism that it actually existed. The power of church leaders was challenged, and replaced with a belief that scientists had

the means to discover all knowledge about the world; a ‘theory of everything’ was possible.

With the advent of quantum physics, and the realisation that science was not able to answer all questions, came the postmodern period. One of the early postmodernism philosophers, Jean-François Leotard (1924-1998) challenged the idea of the Grand Narrative, proposing that all knowledge is narrative, and that any view of knowledge was relative to the subjective perception of the knower. Taken to its ultimate end, it becomes nihilistic, as all attempts to achieve objective ‘truth’ reach a dead end.

From the 1970s, postmodern theorising became a dominant influence in the academy. It offered a medium whereby intellectuals could critically evaluate the society in which we live, including how social injustices were continued through structural inequalities. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) talked about ‘power/knowledge’, to represent the intertwining of a relationship, where those holding power shape knowledge in accordance with their own intentions.

Despite their apparent differences, both modernism (knowledge is objective and exists independently of the knower) and postmodernism (knowledge is subjective, and is relative to the knower) have a shared foundation: matter is the primary constituent of the universe. Although this is not often as explicit in postmodernism as it is in science, the former does not challenge the materialist and secular basis of modernism, and so the assumption is perpetuated.

Knowledge in contemporary society

In this section, my aim is to demonstrate how three main power holders - specifically government, big business, and the media - influence what counts as knowledge. The claim is

that these power-holders, who are mutually supportive of each other, are working in accordance with a neoliberal ideology, which promotes a materialist understanding of reality. Worldviews which are based on spiritual or transpersonal worldviews are excluded. A brief overview of the history of neoliberalism shows how we have reached a place where plans for the future of humanity are influenced more by progress in artificial intelligence, than by ideas of an evolution of consciousness.

The neoliberal ideology has its roots in the founding in 1947 of the Mount Pelerin Society, a gathering of economists and others interested in establishing market-oriented economic systems. In a previous article, I have written about the influence on neoliberalism by the principles of Newtonian science, which explicitly informed neo-classical economics (Walton 2021). The main point, relevant to this article, is that neoliberalism is grounded in a materialist ontology, reflecting a mechanistic view of the universe. The economy was seen to be the driving force in society, also operating as a machine. Milton Friedman, one of the key proponents of neoliberalism, wrote: “positive economics is, or can be, an ‘objective’ science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences” (1966:4).

Although the Mount Pelerin society continued to expand, it made little impact on wider society till the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the UK in 1979, and Ronald Reagan as President of the USA in 1981. Friedrich Hayek, a founding member, was a key adviser to Thatcher, and a major influence in her thinking and policy making. In the decades since her election, neoliberalism has intensified its influence on all aspects of society.

In many ways, neoliberalism evolved as an undercover operation, with a reluctance to name the ideology that was being imposed on society. Charles Koch,

a co-founder of the American Tea Party, noted that 'in order to avoid undesirable criticism, how the organisation is controlled and directed should not be widely advertised' (Monbiot 2016). But a substantial widening of inequalities has made many academics, and other concerned members of the public, question what is actually happening. The top 1% of the population continue to become richer, whilst poverty levels rise, even amongst those in full-time work. Over the last 10 years, research and writing into neoliberalism has proliferated, uncovering the materialist ontology that informs it.

Big business and the media both have a vested interest in perpetuating policies which promote the principle of profit, and allows them freedom to act in ways that increase the wealth of the few to the detriment of the many. Danny Dorling, in his book *Inequality and the 1%* (2019), shows how allowing wealth inequalities to grow is one of the greatest social threats of our time. The Sutton Trust has undertaken a major study, which provides evidence that Britain is a country 'whose power structures are dominated by a narrow section of the population' (2019:4). They count the media as members of the 'elite, growing more socially exclusive over time' (2019: 41). Ridout talks of how the media 'have the potential to influence the political behaviour of individuals and the functioning of governments and democracy' (2019:2).

It is little wonder, then, that the SMN fails to make an impact on wider society. Any organisation that promotes an ontology which challenges the dominant scientific materialist worldview is unlikely to gain widespread attention. Much as a goldfish knows only the water in which it swims, so the majority of people know only of the materialist paradigm in which they are embedded, and which is reinforced by our mainstream institutions.

The longer this lack of awareness endures, the more difficult it will be to find a way out of the materialist morass, and achieve a more expanded and hopeful view of what is possible. It might appear that one solution is to include in the education of our children the knowledge and skills that are required to critically evaluate the society in which they live, plan what changes they would like to see happen, and work with others to implement those plans. But in fact, if we take a closer look, we will see that education is being engineered so that it leads to a reinforcing of society as it currently exists.

Education as a case study of the relationship between power and knowledge

The purpose of education has been widely debated since the time of John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey was a renowned American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, who was passionate about education, and the role of education in the creation of civilised society. In his seminal book *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, he explains his view of education, both formal and informal, as providing the means by which young people are prepared to live in adult society. Schools should be run as democratic establishments, with students encouraged to actively participate in decisions concerning their educational lives. In this way, they would be learning how to become responsible citizens, able to critically reflect and evaluate the society in which they live, and take positive action to create change where necessary.

Over twenty years later, he wrote *Experience and Education*, which was a concise summary of his ideas about the challenges and possibilities of education. His reflections included an analysis of both traditional and progressive education. The former focused on a prescribed curriculum, where the student had their learning determined for them. Progressive education focussed more on the students' interests, allowing them to create their own learning programmes. From these, Dewey developed a third approach, based on the belief that experiential learning, combined with schools being places of democratic living, would lead to individual and social growth within flourishing communities.

Since Dewey's death in 1952, following the 1944 Education Act which established a universal system of free, compulsory schooling from the age of five to fifteen, passionate discussions concerning the best form of education have continued by people across the political spectrum. A major point of contention has been the professionalism of teachers, and the role of government in mandating what and how they should teach. The Plowden Report, published in 1967, supported the view that teachers should have responsibility for providing children with structured opportunities to follow their natural interests and abilities. However, since that time, the autonomy of teachers has been gradually eroded, with the UK government introducing a National Curriculum, evaluated through targets, tests and inspections.

Clarke & Phelan (2017) engage in a detailed analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on educational research, teacher education and the work of teachers in schools. They report on attempts made to position research as an exact science, leading to certainty about outcomes, gained through the linear connections uncovered between research questions, data, evidence, and predictions about data. Good practice is assumed to be measurable and replicable, which denies the complexity of the relational dimension of classroom teaching. This 'quest for certitude is further fomented by neoliberal policy proliferation...which serve to undermine and work against the critically informed yet creative judgement of teachers by ring-fencing decision-making within policies, protocols, rules and guidelines' (2017:11). Clarke & Phelan claim that neoliberalism's misgivings about trusting professionals to do their work in a way that meets the government's requirements is demonstrated in two ways. They prescribe the curricula that governs what students learn in schools and universities; and at the same time, stipulate the standards by which the work of teachers in schools will be assessed.

Thus, any vision that Dewey had of schools as places of democracy, or the hopes created by the Plowden Report that a teacher would be given professional autonomy, are relegated to the realms of history. In searching for a way forward, a light needs to be shone on the current political control of what constitutes 'good' research and education, and the underlying motivations for the extent of this control. There is at work a creeping authoritarianism that will feed right into the agenda of individuals such as Klaus Schwab and Yuval Noah Harari, who foresee how the elite minority will use technology to 'hack human beings on a massive scale'¹.

In many ways, the future is looking pessimistic. There is widespread despair amongst people, from diverse backgrounds, beliefs and traditions, about what is happening in the world right now. It has become a cliché to say that there are various crises that are threatening our existence; but being a cliché does not detract from the verity of the statement. It is important, though, to remain optimistic. In the following section, I introduce the idea of 'metamodernity' as a concept that might prove of value, in helping us find a positive way forward.

The hope of metamodernity as a new cultural era

Metamodernism is a relatively new concept, with early work focusing on arts, aesthetics and culture (Ven den Akker et al 2017). It has been taken up by several writers and thinkers, including the generation of a new cultural code which offers ‘meaning and hope in a complex world’ (Andersen 2019), a different approach to politics (Freinacht 2017), and the ‘return of transcendence’ (Severan 2021).

It is not my intention to promote any specific version of how metamodernism has been interpreted to date, but rather to highlight its possibilities. Jonathan Rowson, in introducing his edited book (Rowson and Pascal 2021), states that it is being used as an ‘umbrella reference point’, encouraging thinking across disciplines about civilization as a whole. It is also attracting attention from people who believe that explorations of spirituality are relevant to the renaissance of society at large. Rowson’s own publishing company, *Perspectiva*, has as its tagline ‘Systems, Souls, Society’, in recognition of the belief that we need to integrate diverse bodies of knowledge and practice. These would include an understanding of world system dynamics, combined with a deep interiority, a grasp of the psyche, and practice-based approaches to cultivating the self within a social context.

David Sloan Wilson, an American Professor of Biology and Anthropology, although not talking about ‘metamodernity’ as such, is committed to the active pursuit of the evolution of culture. Influenced by the work of Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Sloan Wilson believes that ‘we are part of something larger than ourselves’, and suggests that Teilhard’s Omega point ‘corresponds to ‘the vision of a world where governments work together for the good of their citizens and live in balance with the rest of life on earth’ (Sloan Wilson 2020, p. xiii). He has received substantial Templeton Foundation funding to research the practical implications of the hypothesis that evolution applies to culture as well as to organisms. A fascinating experiment with chickens is used to demonstrate the principle that choices in behaviours eventually lead to changes in biological traits (pp.84-87). His work has much to offer those interested in the idea of consciously evolving a metamodern culture.

I would like, then, to propose that the concept of metamodernity is used to create a theoretical and practical

framework that can be used by all committed to making a positive difference in the world. The basic recognition would be that every cultural era – indigenous, premodern, modern and postmodern – contains valuable elements, as well as limitations. Perhaps the aim can be to critically evaluate and distil the best from each of these eras, and engage with others in participative dialogue about how the mutual learning can be applied in the best interests of all.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the ‘politics of knowledge’, with one aim being to investigate why knowledge of the spiritual, and notions of a postmaterialist worldview, do not attract attention in mainstream society. Essentially, the explanation given here is that the modern and postmodern cultural eras, which have dominated the western world for the last 400 years, assume – either implicitly or explicitly – a materialist foundation to reality. Being now a ‘post-truth’ society, influenced by an awareness of cultural pluralism, has provided a space in which those with power, including governments, big business and the media, can control what counts as knowledge. Allowed to continue, there is a danger that dystopian visions of an elite few, manipulating the behaviour of the majority through the use of technologies inserted into our bodies, will become a reality.

Collaborating with others, across diverse organisations and disciplines, to the evolution of a consciously created metamodern culture, would provide the SMN with an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity is that it would legitimate its interests in both science and spirituality (which relate most strongly to modernist and indigenous cultural eras respectively), and allow full exploration of their value. The challenge is that, to be influential, they need to learn more about how different social and political forces are using their power to determine what is knowledge. It is not consistent to grieve the fact that we live in a secular, materialist society, whilst supporting the neoliberal policies that sustain such a society. Consciously evolving a post-materialist worldview requires intervention and action as well as theorisation and rhetorical presentations.

Perhaps our greatest hope for the future lies in being able to dissolve the boundaries that separate us from others having a shared vision of human flourishing, and engage in co-operative inquiries (Heron 1996) that research how that vision can be achieved.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.bitchute.com/video/ARbczWGgDPRA/> at 5.45 mins.