Are You Looking for Trouble? A Reply to Mark Erickson's "Afterword"

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"If you're looking for trouble, you came to the right place." — Elvis Presley
Trouble

Like Elvis, Mark Erickson is looking for trouble. Referring to Donna Haraway, Erickson argues that our vocation *demands* us to "stay with the trouble" (2020, 22). And while I wholeheartedly agree with him that social scientists should seek and stay with the trouble, I am not sure that he came to the right place.

Before I explain why I believe we have to look for more trouble elsewhere, and how this is connected to the work of Max Weber, it is worth asking why Mark Erickson wants us to be in troublemakers in the first place.

In his "Afterword" on *Social Epistemology's* special issue celebrating the 100th anniversary of Max Weber's seminal contribution "Science as a Vocation," Erickson raises the important question of what the value of science *is* (23). Moreover, he simultaneously highlights the tension between the (practical) value of science and the struggle of scientists (including Weber himself) to keep science "value *free*."

This question seems to be particularly timely since the current COVID-19 pandemic brought the political, economic and social life of almost all countries to a grinding halt. The practical value of science seems obvious given that politicians rely heavily on the advice of medical experts, and press briefings of medical research institutes frequently make frontpage news. In the first weeks of the pandemic especially, criticism of the dominance of the "technoscientific world" (21) had all but vanished. Scientists were not only trusted with finding a cure or vaccine, but also were tasked with developing guidelines and rules to navigate through dramatically different everyday-lives. This reliance on expert advice, however, has caused considerable backlash. In the U.S., armed protesters have demanded an end of the lockdown measures recommended by scientific advisers. In Germany an emerging alliance of far-right activists and proponents of conspiracy theories seek to take over similar, albeit unarmed protest. Publicly exposed experts, especially leading virologists in the US and some European countries, have even received death threats (Staudenmaier 2020).

Reading Mark Erickson's afterword against this background, could create the impression that we are currently experiencing a new phase in the "absolute polytheism (…) of the world of value" (Weber cited after Brubaker 1984, 62) a *Götterdämmerung* even in the "irreconcilable death-struggle between values" (62). Given the prominent, but still contested, role of science Erickson is certainly right to ask us to "stay with the trouble" and "immerse ourselves" in the worldviews of a polytheistic world (22).

Where is the Trouble?

Where exactly should we look for this trouble? The roadmap that Mark Erickson suggests would lead to us into rather familiar territory. His starting point is Paul Feyerabend's "conceptual totalitarianism"—the notion that scientific reasoning, in the social sciences

particularly, depends on theoretical frameworks "we are socialized into" (Feyerabend after Erickson 2020, 22). He further calls for acknowledging "the mythical and epic character" of science and invites us to "get past our modern and reductive version of science as a vocation" (22). Turning back to Weber, Erickson urges us to "embrace the polytheism" of "incommensurable metanarratives" (22).

While I fully acknowledge that this approach can lead to a fruitful discussion, as a growing body of literature on STS aptly demonstrates, I am less convinced that his roadmap would lead us the kind of trouble that is helping us to fully understand the value of science.

I might be mistaken but it looks to me that the path carved out by Erickson will lead to yet another recital of the conflict between postmodern and Latourian scholars on the one side, and proponents of scientific realism on the other. The former will insist on the social embeddedness of research practices and emphasize the social conditioning of scientific knowledge. The latter will inevitably decry the relativism of their opponents. I do not see how this fundamental disagreement about philosophical principles could be resolved. Moreover, I believe that these disagreements have little relevance for contemplating the value of science—not for "vocational scientists" and certainly not for people trying to grapple the practical value of science for their everyday lives.

What would follow from the concession that that all attempts to find cures for diseases, understand atmospheric chemistry or decipher contemporary political discourses are socially conditioned and therefore mere chapters in a techno-scientific metanarrative? For Weber, very little: Despite his conviction that science is the single most important driver of the rationalization of modern societies science can never hope to reveal the "meaning of the world" (Brubaker 1984, 31).

I therefore suggest to briefly explore the implications of Erickson's preferred route before we should start to look for trouble elsewhere. Let us begin with the first group, the scientific insider. What does Feyerabend's conceptual totalitarianism mean for people who try to do scientific work? Does it imply that because "we cannot escape from the conceptual frameworks we are socialized into" (Feyerabend cited after Erickson 2020, 22) we cannot be conscious of these frameworks?

We do not need to invoke the image (or "pipe dream?") of Karl Mannheim's "socially unattached intelligential" (1936, 155) to conceive of scientists, social scientists particularly, as being (at least partially) aware of the various influence on their work. In his autobiographical essay *On Intellectual Craftmanship,* for instance, C. Wright Mills argues that social scientists should not split work from live (2008, 46). Instead he describes the "intellectual craftsman" as someone who "tries to integrate what he is doing intellectually and what he is experiencing as a person" (47).

The integration of personal experience and intellectual interest leads to intellectual products that are "one step removed from the library and *the field*" (48). Mills autobiographical account exemplifies that we do not have to choose between a reductive vision of science or a vision that depicts scientists as unconsciously "trapped" in their respective socialized concepts respectively. For Mills social science thinking is "a simultaneous struggle for conceptual order and yet at the same time empirical comprehensiveness" (62). This inherent tension,

which always carries the risk of failure, also turns social scientific work into the "most passionate endeavor of which a man is capable" (62). In short for Mills, much like Weber, the value of science is *obvious* for those who hear the calling.

The crucial question therefore—and this question *is not* normally addressed by the above-mentioned clashes between realism and relativism—is how to determine the value for all those who do not hear the calling. We should, then, revisit Weber's image of "polytheism." As Rogers Brubaker reminds us, the metaphor is part of Weber's "uncharacteristically extravagant" polytheism to describe the fragmentation of modern societies into distinct "supra-individual" value-spheres *and* "a contingent conflict between the subjective value orientations of individuals" (62).

This Must be the Place

For Weber, value conflicts occur on the level of one's subjective value orientations and between "value-spheres" that is "distinct provinces of activity, each having its own inherent dignity and its own immanent norms" (Brubaker 1984, 6). For Weber, the clash of gods, the "death-struggle" takes place between value spheres rather than the subjective value-orientations of individuals. Perhaps, this is also the right place to look for trouble?

To me this seems promising because Weber's depiction goes to the bottom of the conflict, the notion of truth itself. For Weber "choosing" a value sphere, regardless of whether we speak of the value sphere of politics, religion or science (or any other empirically identifiable value sphere) is entirely subjective and " cannot be forced on anyone" (Bruun 2008, 101). Scientific truth for Weber, unlike many of his Neo-Kantian contemporaries, is *not* a universal value (100). This further implies that we can draw a sharp distinction between those who chose the values associated with the value sphere of science (or "intellectual value sphere") and those who do not. Moreover, since it is true that this decision cannot be forced on anyone

> once a person has made a subjective choice in favour of the value of scientific truth, the inescapable consequences are, in Weber's view, crystal clear: As he puts it: ". . . if we . . . *decide to* (wollen) accept the aim of scientific analysis of the empirically given reality as valuable, then the "norms" of our thought will *force* (erzwingen) us to respect them … (Brunn 2008, 100, original emphasis).

In other words, for Weber, "scientific truth is precisely what is *valid* for all who *seek* the truth" (Brubaker 1984, 67). However, since "we cannot learn the *meaning* of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect" science "is impotent to arbitrate between conflicting value commitments" (67).

If we explore Weber's value spheres for trouble worth staying in, we therefore discover two distinct zones of conflict. The first one comprises the dispute that Erickson has in mind. However, rather than being a consequence of the "fragmentation into a plurality of incommensurable metanarratives" the alleged "reductive vision" (22) of science and the

scientific vocation manifest itself as a civil war within the value sphere of science. Weber himself didn't foresaw this since for him "in any *vocational activity*, the *task* […] must be performed in accordance with its own inherent laws" (2013, 494, original emphasis). The scientist, regardless of whether we think of natural of social scientists, should have made the subjective choice for "scientific truth."

Weber was highly critical of the emerging hegemony of "the intellectual" or scientific value sphere in the process of modernization Moreover, he rejected simple concepts of the rationalization the world through objective scientific knowledge (Brubaker 1984, 78-80). However, he didn't focus on value conflict *about* the inherent laws *within* a values sphere.

As a consequence, while Mark Erickson would actually lead us to "trouble" we would find ourselves in the internal strive of vocational scientists about the validity of the inherent laws that guide the performance of their tasks. And while this is admittedly an interesting conflict, it is a dispute that is detached from the polytheism *between* value spheres.

These value conflicts are the true battlegrounds and trouble we should seek. Despite being as irresolvable as the above-mentioned disputes within science, these "death struggles" do not resolve around one fundamental philosophical disagreement but many. This means that the conflicts themselves can only be understood if conflicting religious convictions, economic preferences, ethical attitudes and political ideologies are taken into consideration.

True Battlegrounds

While trying to pinpoint the value of science *within* the scientific or intellectual value sphere amounts to an elaborate contemplation about the validity of its "inherent laws," focusing on the death struggle *between* value spheres allows us to investigate the *relative* value of science.

What value does science have for others and why should they value science? This question not only reveals the normative character of the value of science, but also highlights that the value of science is historically contingent.

Mapping out the conflicts between value spheres—e.g. the hostility of certain political camps towards science—allows us to better understand the value of *scientists*. Hostility towards science and culturally rooted "anti-intellectualism" might be an integral part of specific cultural spheres. *Not* seeking scientific truth therefore should neither be confused with "irrational" behaviour nor can it necessarily be depicted as disputes inherent to the value sphere of science. The COVID-19 protesters, the climate sceptics and anti-vaccination activists are not necessarily relativist. They are probably not particularly interested in sophisticated debates about epistemological questions. They reject the science because they do not like its "findings."And they reject the scientists because they represent an "aloof elite" of "eggheads" (Ruser forthcoming) who stand on the wrong side of a normative conflict.

This kind of trouble seems to be more interesting and also more consequential than the internal quarrels of scientists. If we want to get an idea of the social value of science, we should dig deep into these conflicts and controversies. We need to understand the concrete hopes and fears of that motivate people to embrace, reject and even condemn science. This

implies that the value of science and indirectly the value of the vocation of science can only be adequately assessed and understood if we acknowledge "that only a narrowly defined class of problems—those involving no conflict over ends or values—have objectively or technically rational solutions. The most pressing problems of social life do involve the clash of ends and values and thus, according to Weber, cannot be solved in an objectively rational manner" (Brubaker 1984, 5).

So, let's take Mark Erickson's invitation seriously. Let's look for trouble. But let's make sure that we're not limiting ourselves to looking for trouble were social scientists usually find their battlegrounds. Latour and Lyotard will only lead us back to the internal strife of the scientific value sphere. And while it matters to *us* whether we are on a "quest for reality" (Tauber 1997), or the mere authors of metanarratives, I am not sure it matters to *all*.

So, let's also take Max Weber seriously and dedicate our attention to the death-struggle between values. This requires careful analyses of specific historical cases, an engagement with the history of epistemology and perhaps most importantly an awareness for the conflicting norms, political ideas and personal convictions that determine the relative value of science. I am confident we will find plenty of trouble here. Trouble that demands a careful analysis but defies a "scientific solution."

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