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Debating the Norms of Scientific Writing: International Workshop for Young Researchers

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The workshop called “Debating the Norms of Scientific Writing” took place at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences (IP CAS) in May 2018. This workshop was aimed at young researchers and it was a joint activity of researchers from CEFRES (Julien Wacquez, main idea and organisation) and the Centre for Science, Technology, and Society Studies (CSTSS).

The workshop focused on the possibilities of social scientific knowledge addressing salient issues in the contemporary world. Taken together, the meeting centred around the topic of scientific, or academic, styles of writing. In particular, it addressed ambitions to provide a more “accurate account of reality” than the one which is reproduced in standard scientific styles. A number of key problems of the social sciences came under scrutiny, such as the issue of whether social scientists still write about the real world – the “referential value” of social scientific texts, the relations between science and literature (the two cultures), and the concepts of the real, the fictional, representations of the truth, etc. Regarding these issues, the workshop provided an opportunity to share experiences among young researchers. Well-established scholars such as John Holmwood and Jean-Luis Fabiani were instrumental in framing the debates around the practical contexts of social science production.

In this text I would like to address some recurrent topics from both the presentations and the discussions. On the whole, my concern relates to the claims to write more realistically, or to capture reality and pursue the truth in particular accounts. Although one of the explicit aims was “to probe these writing experiments, and to study how they express, justify, problematise, and renegotiate the normative rhetoric of disciplines,”¹ in reality, a large number of presentations did pursue, if not truth, then, at least, an aspect of more realistic writing.

¹ This and previous citations reference the text of the workshop’s call for papers. See *Debating the Norms of Scientific Writing – Call for Papers*, accessed November 18, 2019, <http://www.cefres.cz/en/8137>.

By that token, the aim of this report is not to address the problem of mirroring nature, but to use sociological concepts of *epistemic cultures* and *machineries* to gain an understanding of what was really happening in the course of the debates. In the next section I will briefly introduce the content of the presentations. Then I will go on to demonstrate some contradictory aspects of the claims to represent reality in writing.

Presentations

The opening keynote talk was given by Jan Balon, who spoke of the recent changes within institutional settings that have had a profound effect on the practices of academic writing. It was stressed that academic institutions have embarked on more restrictive policies and have been developing various tools for the control of academic work. New concepts such as “excellence,” “international expertise,” “applicability,” “efficiency,” “links to industry,” and so forth have become signs of the new knowledge regime. Drawing on the book *Social Knowledge in the Making*² and his own work within the institutional history of sociology, he concluded that in relation to academic writing, an array of regulative measures have been introduced, which are very often largely prescriptive as regards academic writing. What is increasingly important is the strategies of major professional journals and publishers, grant agencies, and academic job markets. In this sense, modes of knowledge production – and also styles of writing – are very often structured not by claims to truth but rather by the reproduction of successful practices.

In the first session, “(Re) Producing New Norms of Writing,” Julien Wacquez presented “The Ways of Science Fiction in the Study of Anthropocene.” Using Tsing’s claim for the need to “find new ways of writing true stories,” he asked how some new writing techniques (particularly those of science fiction) would address the contemporary age of the Anthropocene better. In his presentation “Straw-Man of Science: ‘Hologrammatic’ Dichotomies as Academic Sparring,” Anibal G. Arregui (CEFRES and the University of Vienna) questioned the alleged dichotomic nature of many arguments in the social sciences, dichotomies scientists wish to oppose. However, what is presented in this “anti-dichotomic quarrel” is, after all, only holograms which non-realistically recreate previous actual (allegedly dichotomic) proposals.

² Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michèle Lamont, *Social Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

The second session was devoted to “Writing Science and/or Writing Politics.” John Holmwood (University of Nottingham) spoke about his book *Countering Extremism in British Schools? The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair* and shared his experience as an expert witness for the defence in a court case. He discussed the role of expertise and the role of public sociology. Consequently, he suggested a model that would facilitate a “jury of peers.” The argument is grounded in the recognition that, while writing, one has a determined responsibility but also “is heard,” which could make a case for public sociology. The role of expertise was also discussed by the author of this report, Jitka Wirthová (Charles University). She distinguished two different types of writing proofs of “necessity” that are present in writing on educational reform. Both types tend to cover up who the author of the claims that are put forward is. In the presentation “How to Write the Proof: Creating Expertise in Strategic Documents for Educational Reform,” she indicated that the actual form of a proof translated into an issue of how educational policy documents relate to reality – as *messengers of other witnesses* or as *heralds of pure reality*.

Actual writing experiences were presented and discussed in the third session, entitled “The Social Scientist as a Writer.” The session was opened by Jean-Luis Fabiani (EHES-CESPRA and Central European University), who gave a lecture on “The Impossible Novelist: Portrait of the Sociologist as a Frustrated Writer.” In the main, he pointed out the fact that sociologists are still required to depict reality in an accurate way, without using the tools of fiction. In the pursuit of resemblance to the hard sciences, social scientists are not able to acknowledge the constraints natural language imposes on the understanding of the social. Nevertheless, in the course of the language turn, when social scientists became more attentive to the issue of their writing, a kind of professional disaster occurred, frustrating navigation between the mere “novelisation” of sociological findings and the illusory promises of false hard social science.

Fanny Charrasse (EHESS-LIER) presented a paper called “Literary but Not Fictional.” She talked about her own writing experience, in which she focused on the advantages, but also the difficulties, of translating reality into a realistic novel and of turning empirical data into theory. She suggested the inspiration by “writing as an enigma,” “the novel as an investigation,” and “informants as interlocutors.” The last author at the workshop, Edouard Chalamet-Denis (EHESS-CESPRA), focused on the applicability of a critique of narrative on history and the humanities. In the presentation “Via Hayden White: Questioning Narrative and Opening Possibilities in the Writing of

History” he showed how this critique wished to counter the idea that the most rigorous logic ensures the best adequacy to reality. By employing his own “para-academic” writing practices, he suggested the aphorism as the best-adapted way to grasp the object of history.

Problem: To Write More Realistically?

In the course of this workshop, many calls for a more “literary” way of writing in science were promoted from a variety of stances. These literary ways, or just different ways, were meant to be a more appropriate way to capture the reality of the world than “traditional” scientific ways of writing. The thing is that traditional scientific writing does not possess any characteristic which would secure its direct access to reality and truth, as the current philosophy of science has informed us.

Nevertheless, I would like to provide some insights that might open up some links that were not approached during the workshop. In the first place, I wish to address the recurrent claim that literary writing is doing better at representing reality than traditional scientific writing. Rethinking is needed, although the claim seems to be the only reasonable solution to the contemporary problematisation of the possibility of objective knowledge and of science itself.

In relation to developments in the philosophy of science and sociological theory over the past 70 years, I suggest that what in fact was the main topic of the workshop was, ultimately, the philosophical problem of representation – a scientific relation to the reality. Some of the papers touched on this issue in a way (Balon, Arregui, Fabiani) but altogether we were, it seemed to me, discovering what had been discovered before, and moreover, we orbited in circles around this significant problem, which remained unnamed.

That is why the primary purpose of this text is to name the problem in a way and try to provide the right perspective on it. In this report, I am aiming at an account which would bring theories of meaning into consideration, because they seem to offer the best access to the problem of representation. The literature I am particularly drawing on here is Knorr Cetina’s epistemic machineries³ and Peregrin’s work on structure and meaning.⁴

³ Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Karin Knorr Cetina, “Epistemic Cultures: Forms of Reason in Science,” *History of Political Economy* 23, no. 1 (1991): 105–22.

⁴ Jaroslav Peregrin, *Význam a struktura* (Praha: Oikoymenth, 1999); Jaroslav Peregrin, *Meaning and Structure: Structuralism of (Post)Analytic Philosophers* (Aldershot: Ashgate,

Problem: Tool-Writing and Matter-Reality Separation

Knorr Cetina introduced the notion of epistemic machinery in her ethnographic studies of natural sciences by focusing on their epistemic features. These features, as are the meanings of the empirical, devices, machines, and other techno-epistemological means, are used to produce scientific objects and knowledge.⁵ However, it is also appropriate to talk about epistemic machineries in the case of the social sciences and humanities, especially with regard to the approaches that also seek to identify some ways of giving a more appropriate account of the social world. Given that these ways were supposed to be the “tools” which would convey social knowledge better, I suggest that epistemic machinery is a suitable concept in this latter case as well. Therefore, it is possible to look at our workshop’s debate through the lenses of the sociology of social science and to bring our pursuit under scrutiny as a kind of social epistemology – that is, epistemic machinery.

Since a particular (scientific) epistemic culture consists of various machineries for generating truth effects,⁶ it is also vital to employ a notion of the structure in the relation of scientific language and reality. As Peregrin suggests, the problem that we are not able to represent the reality in the right way is double-bonded. It is not just the problem of “means” of representation of the real, nor it is only the problem of the “real” real, i.e., the problem of true meaning. Means and objects are interconnected. The problem is when the expressions of language are still understood as designators – it is a distorted way of thinking about the working of language and about the nature of meaning. “The problems arise from the very attempt to see an expression as the designator of its meaning.”⁷

2000). In these books, Peregrin’s explicit aim is the mathematical modelling of the theory of structure – the relation of the whole and parts. In doing so, he offers his own explication of Saussurean structuralism, which he has done in a non-conventional manner, having directed it to the work of some post-analytical philosophers, such as Quine, Davidson, Sellars, and Brandom. However, in his argumentation about the structuralism of post-analytical philosophy, Peregrin describes the writings of some French structuralists as “stylistic jugglery” and continental and post-analytical structuralism as incompatible. On this issue of the (im-) possibility of understanding between these two currents see Ondřej Beran, *Naš jazyk, můj svět* (Praha: Filosofia, 2010), who clearly shows not only the possibility but even some existing common assumptions of these currents.

⁵ Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures*.

⁶ Ibid., 47; Knorr Cetina, “Epistemic Cultures,” 107.

⁷ Peregrin, *Meaning and Structure*, 27.

In that sense, it is not possible to think about accounting for the world in the division of independent things of reality and the right word-sign-language item for them. For Peregrin, this is not only the case of ordinary language, while scientific language would do better, but it is also the case of the general relation of the language and the world. Therefore, the issue of how to write more realistically is actually a question posed within this assumed division. If we want to account for the world, we need to pose a different question: what are the rules of language that we use in social science?

Knorr Cetina's account is clear-cut in this case: the means co-determine the objects. The reality is what we are able to see. In the case of natural science, it is what our machines, in a widened meaning, our epistemic machineries, enable us to take as a scientific object for which we provide various accounts. This is not a new idea at all; it came together with the movement in quantum physics at the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, in the case of the social sciences and humanities presented in the workshop, it seemed that we had been in the swirl of medium – object (tool – matter) dichotomy.

A tool is not anything outside the matter, which would have grasped the independent matter independently – the language tool is not anything outside the real. Therefore, it is not a question of whether we ever find a way of representing reality but whether there are any such things waiting for our representations. The question for the next workshop could probably be something in the manner: what does writing in the social sciences do with its objects? The problem is that we are still thinking through the separation between the real world and thoughts, the separation of the context of explanation and the context of inquiry.⁸ It means the division of the thing and the way we represent it. In my opinion, these assumptions shaped many of the research questions of the workshop's presentations.

An Epistemic Machinery: Tools – Purposes – Objects

Every knowledge process (as an attempt at describing the real more realistically) has some epistemic features, even if its aim is to transgress narrow scientific writing. These features vary according to the particular knowledge programme; nevertheless, the feature I shall focus on here is the enactment of objects and the tools of their inquiry.

⁸ Isaac Ariail Reed, "Epistemology Contextualized: Social-Scientific Knowledge in a Postpositivist Era," *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 1 (2010): 20–39.

In pursuit of a vantage position from which to touch the real (ideally) absolutely realistically, natural sciences engage in many practices, as Knorr Cetina has informed us. First and foremost, a scientific object must be made ready to be scrutinised.⁹ After an object has been established it is possible to make a realistic/truth/knowledge claim *about* it as an independent object. These claims are then recorded in scientific writings. This particular entanglement of tool – purpose – object is the epistemic regime of the sciences.

However, being formerly a tool, expected to operate effectively in realistic descriptions of the real (object), scientific writing became obsolete (as was acknowledged in the workshop call as well). But according to the current philosophy of language, it is not obsolete in terms of descriptions of reality. The objection led toward a much more profound issue than merely tool-mending. The objection directed at the kind of relation to reality as such – not only partially – to the tool, but toward the whole *tool-purpose-matter* relation. As Peregrin put it: “What I reject is [...] that language should be seen as an attachment of expressions, as signifiers, to some independently existing signifieds.”¹⁰ Language (writing) is not a set of labels which are attached to independent objects; it is not a straightforward means of expressing pre-existing thoughts, objective abstracts, or real scientific objects.¹¹

Scientific writing became institutionalised together with its purpose of realistic description. These two (a kind of writing and a kind of purpose) are in a mutual relationship. It is well known that the position of scientific writing was shaken as a result of the crisis in the theory of representation. Nevertheless, it is not possible to save the purpose (to be more realistic) together with the renunciation of scientific writing. In other words, we cannot reject scientific writing and mutually preserve the purpose for which this kind of writing became stabilised. This tension was, in my opinion, palpable in some of the presentations at the workshop. The purpose remained untouched, and merely yet another effective way of writing was targeted by the presenters. Moreover, such a search implies that it should be some other form of *scientific* writing, not literal, aphoristic, or enigmatic, which operate under a different epistemic regime than that of science and its purpose. The claim for enigmatic, aphoristic, and alternative writing which, at the same

⁹ Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures*, chapters 5, 6.

¹⁰ Peregrin, *Meaning and Structure*, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

time, seeks to be more realistic is a contradictory claim. It negates either the epistemic regime of literary writing or the epistemic regime of realistic description. A kind of epistemic machinery (as presented in the workshop) consisted, in my opinion, of the creation of *points of immediateness* touching reality directly through alternative writing, while the claim for writing realistically *about* was preserved. In this respect, there is a risk that language will be limited to the role of imitation of reality, which means to the role of a better or a worse instrument.

Conclusion

As a participant in the workshop, I felt that we were somehow trapped in the very same kinds of boundaries as those we (or at least several of us) wished to step beyond. As I have mentioned above, these beneficial debates have forced me to rethink some presuppositions and, especially, to articulate properly what was formerly a slight feeling that there is something misleading in the pursuit of being “more realistic” and “more truthful.” That is why, in my research, I wish to work not through the perspective of these dichotomies as a-priories: rather, I wish to explore how any epistemic machinery forms any understanding through making divisions of any kind. The only doubt I maintain is whether I will be able to do so.

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