

Savoirs, pouvoirs et démocratie

Engagement public et participation aujourd'hui

Dominique Pestre
EHESS, Paris

This presentation is directly inspired by the report I wrote for the EU directorate Science and Society. This report is also posted on this site

What I suggest to do today is to raise some questions on what might be too simple in (some of) our ways of framing questions, to consider points that could question the implicit assumptions of our thinking and destabilize our too strong certainties.

What I want to do is to try and reformulate the complexity of the relationships between science / technology / society / economy / politics / and development, to use historical cases to do it, and possibly propose policy caveats derived from these readings.

In other words, I would like to comment on the complex matrix that makes the '*science and society*' *nexus* and to open up two or three of the rather intricate networks of encounters and tensions in which they are embedded

But first I want to reassert two key points about which, I hope, we all agree in this room

Point 1 : Science is a mere fraction of what should count as knowledge in society

Useful, interesting, decisive knowledge are produced in many other social spaces than academic settings -- think of community-based development and research, think of environmental knowledge, or of free software associations

Science (as knowledge) cannot but be partial and limited ; it is a form of knowledge that has specific blind spots since it is universal in its claims and methods, (often) reductionist, and fascinated by technical fixes ;

It is a way that is rarely aware of what it does not know but that has the power to impose its solutions as the only true and pertinent ones

Normatively it is thus essential to defend the idea of a multiplicity of sites of knowledge production, each with its own preoccupations and values, biases and networks ; of the importance of having them financed and recognized as legitimate ; and of anticipating the form their confrontation could or should take

Point 2 : it is vital to reassert the importance, for any lively democratic life, of social engagement and sharing of experience

-- in knowledge production as in other question and decisions.

That might mean, among other things :

- * helping local people and activists raise questions -- about safety or precaution, about alternative routes to development, etc ;
- * conceiving institutions for protecting these people ;
- * defining precise procedures for integrating as many people as possible in reflection and decision about techno-products ;
- * trying to have these procedures become an enduring collective learning process -- *something not easy to achieve* since participation has become a tool of management since the late 1980s ;
- * and helping academics to retain some independence from major social powers and to collaborate with, and benefit and learn from, as many social actors as possible

However, it is as essential not to remain with too simple ideas,
perhaps not to be too romantic (notably with what is perhaps called too
easily and emphatically ‘Civil Society’),
to grasp the picture in its complexity, tensions and contradictions – in
order to be in a better position to act and succeed

Let me propose four points of warning, four points that would deserve to
be more precisely considered

1. About participatory procedures and the way to 'use' them.

These procedures (consensus conferences for example) are essential, we all agree. However, their framing (who fixes their agenda ? who runs the show ?) and the way they are integrated in the decision processes, are of central importance for what will come out : think of the *Etats Généraux sur l'Environnement* as a prototype

It might thus be essential to be able to quickly move from being *in* (i.e. to participate) and *out* (meaning to withdraw from the process when it is too much instrumentalized by particular actors) ; to promote participatory and learning procedures and contribute to their success -- but to be also ready to jump out and to go back to other, less consensual, forms of action

That might be essential for a key reason : historically, oppositions to certain new technologies and their direct and indirect effects have been central for the development of safer technological systems. Whatever historical example we consider, *the making of safer techno-industrial worlds has always been largely achieved due to refusals and active resistance*, and to the solutions that had to be invented to cope with them

2. About the science / society relationship as seen from the way democratic societies function

Personal preferences, power relationships and interests of all kinds are constitutive of social worlds, of democracy and of the science business ;

Said otherwise, there are inevitable tensions (meaning without simple and universal solutions) between individual freedom and collective choices, between markets and regulations, etc. That means that only *compromises* are possible, and that the notion of *consensus* asks for some caution

More precisely, because there are no simple, universal solutions to these *many* 'tensions', democratic, modern societies call for, and cherish, a multiplicity of independent and parallel ways of 'regulating' themselves

They do that through :

markets

administrative control

regular elections

legislative actions

court decisions, etc.

Decisions, choices and/or collective preferences are thus arrived at -- and techno-scientific products enter society – through competing means and ‘institutions’

(3) that work according to different principles (courts follow a logics and principles that are often at odds with expert procedures meant to allow a product to be put on markets for example)

(2) and that often lead to different solutions and arrangements

This vision leads to two key comments and warnings :

(10) there is no unique, optimal solution to the ‘science’ / ‘society’ relationships -- and the question is more, when considering decisions, about clearly articulated forms of contradictory debate on the one hand, arbitration and choice on the other

(2) The key parameter that remains if that of the various ‘cités de justice’ that are mobilized by people, the importance of that ecological diversity for democracy

As Ricoeur wrote : ‘Une démocratie n’est pas un régime politique sans conflits, mais un régime dans lequel les conflits sont ouverts et en outre négociables (...) Sous ce régime, le conflit n’est pas un accident ni un malheur ; il est l’expression du caractère non décidable de façon scientifique ou dogmatique du bien public (...) La discussion politique est sans conclusion, bien qu’elle ne soit pas sans décision’.

A last, central conclusion in normative terms might be that we should perhaps not consider that the core of democratic life resides in devising the best / optimal *procedure* to collectively *decide* – since many things are just ‘done’ (products are put on markets for example) ;

As important, or even more important, might be

- *the active protection of people proposing alternative ways of making worlds, the systematic help given to dissidents to go on with their expertise and values, and publicize it ;

- *the institutionalisation of post-hoc assessments and controls -- giving more importance, in short, to what Rosanvallon recently called ‘la démocratie de surveillance’

3. About the question of appropriation of knowledge (and not only its distribution and the variety of its sites of production)

The question of Intellectual Property Rights (that has become recently central) should not be treated as a technical question but as a social and political question. It should not be treated as a mere matter of fact (it would just be the way patent officers do their ‘business’) but rather as a range of possible options in a palette of social tools. Deciding where to put the cursor separating open knowledge from proprietary knowledge is, for example, a key political signal for ‘knowledge societies.’

One comment : The point is not necessarily to attack the legitimacy of proprietary knowledge but to recognise the importance of other forms of life, the social legitimacy and economic importance of parallel ways of making and appropriating knowledge (open software for example, ‘popular’ epidemiology or seed selection). Their role and importance need to be promoted and evaluated, and they should probably be protected when they differ too much from the dominant values and norms.

Democratic societies have much to gain from accepting and learning how to live with variety since variety is an asset for efficient ‘knowledge societies’

4. About the way we are governed now

The world in which we live has been profoundly reconfigured over the last three to four decades. Economic, social and international relationships and values have undergone drastic changes (see for example Wendy Brown, recently translated in French)

In line with these changes, a new definition of the political has emerged – in which the notions of ‘governance’ is playing a crucial role. Through the ‘soft’ notions of ‘global responsibility, accountability and ethics’, ‘governance’ has replaced the stricter legal constraints that previously defined (national) politics (the definition of the ‘citizen’ as a bearer of rights and duties for example, the constitutional duty of regular voting, etc.)

A form of governmentality have thus emerged. Today, universal calls for a government of the self are combined with extended regimes of scanning of populations. They run from the detailed management of medical doctors to that of patients and migrants and to generalized bench marking procedures.

Governance, governmentality, and active management of knowledge and through knowledge, should thus constitute an object of attention. Notions like accountability, responsibility or bench marking should be carefully studied