

Researching publics

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The crisis of representation is felt in both social sciences and democracy. I describe the main features of this crisis and sketch the outlines of a possible way out. Starting from an optimistic viewpoint on what social sciences might accomplish once evolved to a next level, I present a scale for social research that facilitates new ideas about democracy and discuss the notion of 'public' as a collection of people that can be identified after an event, because they share common experiences during the event. These experiences are expressed in narratives. The method I propose is based on narrative research and transdisciplinary meaning production. The research process is democratic and the outcomes offer opportunities for social change.

Crisis in social sciences

Founding father of sociology Auguste Comte was pessimistic about empiricism and yet positive about social laws that explain continuity and development. As a result of this ambiguity, sociologists have followed two roads from then onwards.

The first path, characterized by the pessimistic viewpoint on empiricism, has met with serious problems. For instance, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) outline, a crisis of representation reoccurred in sociology in the mid 1980s. Academics from critical theory, feminist theory and post-colonial theory maintained that the neutrality of representation of the 'other' was a fiction. They preferred theories that focus on patterns over those that depart from causal loops and linear relations. This crisis continued throughout the 1990s, when post-structuralists and post-modernists criticized representation, legitimacy and the praxis of social sciences. Post-structuralists questioned the possibility of representing lived experiences without mediation. They claimed that these experiences came forth from the text of researchers and were therefore always mediated through their linguistic, social, cultural, ethnic and disciplinary background as well as their race and gender. Because they doubted the innovative potential of social research when society is only expressed in texts, they pleaded for action oriented research. Post-modernists put aside the aspirations of *grand narratives* that try to offer all-embracing explanations for humanity, often mutually exclusive and oppressive. They turned to local,

small-scale theories instead (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). The road continuing from the flaws of empiricism and the embrace of the mediated gaze has led to a set of microsociologies and qualitative methods to accompany their followers.

The foundation of the other path was laid by Comte's positive conviction that social laws can indeed be discovered, but haven't been discovered so far. This is a problem waiting to be fixed, be it not by sociologists alone. Their by far biggest problem is, according to Lopreato and Crippen (1999), that they fail to provide even one law or principle general enough to suggest a large number of logically interrelated hypotheses. This failure implies that social sciences also lack "the logic needed for coherent conceptualization and operationalization, appropriate methods for falsification, and hence the guidance toward a growing body of systematic, cumulative knowledge represented by a hierarchy of theoretical propositions cutting across the entire institutional framework" (p. xii). This road led some sociologists to seek rapprochement to natural sciences in order to borrow tools proven successful there. Lopreato and Crippen caution that, unless it wants to be cancelled out of the intellectual landscape in the next few decades, sociology will have to participate in the scientific revolution that evolutionary biology has started and that has infected so many other disciplines since: "Here, more than anywhere else, is where the action is today in behaviour science" (p. xiii).

Can the social be researched?

Both roads, divergent as they might be, are similar in one point. They lead to research activities. The unspoken assumption is that society can be researched. For sociologists, this isn't a strange assumption, for it's the legitimation of their activities. But some academics have taken neither road. Baudrillard, for instance, doubts a legitimate ground for sociology. In his 1983 essay *In the shadow of the silent majorities* he calls the social a "spongy referent", an "opaque but equally translucent reality", a "nothingness" he sums up with "the masses" (p. 1). A mass is a highly implosive phenomenon that consists in its silence, a "black hole which engulfs the social" (p. 3). Understanding a mass as a black hole, Baudrillard says, is the opposite of sociological understanding, which has to rely on a "positive and definitive hypothesis of the social" (p. 4). He states that the silent majority of the masses as an imaginary referent doesn't mean it isn't there, but that it's impossible to represent it. The masses are no longer referents, because they don't want to belong to the order of representation. They don't speak out, they're polled. They don't think, they're researched. The referendum has replaced the political referent. Opinion polls, questionnaires, referendums and the media are the operating parts that no longer belong to a representative dimension, but to a simulative one. The significance of the silence is paradoxical: it isn't a silence that doesn't speak, but a silence that forbids that it is spoken for.

Fluid knowledge

There's another point to be made about researching the social. Giddens (1990) says that more sociological knowledge doesn't lead to more control of social development, because "the development of sociological knowledge is parasitical upon lay agents' concepts; on the other hand, notions coined in the meta-languages of the social sciences routinely reenter the universe of actions they were initially formulated to describe or account for" (p. 15). Giddens calls this 'double hermeneutics', to explain how no knowledge under conditions of modernity is knowledge in the sense of 'to know'. This reflexive relation actively constitutes behaviour and practices. As a consequence, knowledge of the social is fluid, dynamic, contingent and open for revision. In 't Veld (2008) stresses the reflexive character of social systems as well and posits that human reflection can in effect lead up to the negation of knowledge about the social altogether. There's a paradoxical relationship between knowledge production about behaviour and the situation it produces. As knowledge production grows, society learns to respond more quickly with a potential negation of that knowledge as a consequence. Society can undo knowledge about itself.

The above can be seen as an indication for a crisis in representation. This crisis isn't limited to the study of society, but is also felt in other domains where representation is sought after. In media, for instance, we see the cinematic self (Denzin 1999, in Holstein & Gubrium 2000) as an identity that's shaped or informed by Hollywood alongside the rise of platforms for self representation. Holstein and Gubrium refer to an explosion of self presentation in America at the turn of the twenty-first century, "where nothing holds selves in place for any length of time and all manner of self definitions collide with each other" (p. 66).

In a world where the self is considered to be scattered and represented in multiple places, where is room for the rationale of representation and democracy? Who do politicians represent, if they do so at all?

Crisis in democracy

Nothing can represent the silent majority and that's, says Baudrillard (1983), its revenge. For centuries it seemed that power rested upon the passivity of the masses, but the force of inertia which power has stirred up, now turns against it as a sign of its own death. Therefore, strategies are developed to reverse the process: from passivity to participation, from silence to speaking. But it's too late, says Baudrillard: the threshold of the critical mass, the involution from the social by inertia, is crossed. To prevent the mass to fall back into its silence and inertia, it is listened (in) to and questioned in order to worm out some oracle. Hence the universal predominance of information and statistics. But instead of energizing masses, information produces only more mass. Masses absorb all signs, meanings

and messages without beaming them back to a central intelligence: they consume them. Baudrillard defines the masses as cemeteries for the dying social.

Active citizenship

We recognize the strategy of energizing the mass in new transactions politicians seek under the header of 'active citizenship'. As I demonstrated elsewhere (Basten 2002), this is a slippery term that depends on definitions of both 'active' and 'citizenship'. People who are busy solving social problems don't refer to themselves in these terms. A lesson most politicians learn today, is that when calling upon 'the masses' (and their call for active citizenship is an example of such a generic strategy), they get no response. Masses can't be represented. Baudrillard stresses that the imperative of meaning production that's expressed in the constantly renewed imperative of moralizing information (to inform better, socialize better, elevate the cultural level of the masses) is bull shit. None of the efforts has effectuated a conversion to the seriousness of the content, not even to the seriousness of the code. It's also nonsense, he continues, to claim that the masses are fooled. That the masses would spontaneously strive for the natural light of rationality has always been a hypocritical hypothesis to secure the intellectual peace of the producers of meaning and to avert the opposite: masses have always rejected meaning and satisfied their lust for spectacle in full freedom. The denial of this freedom is robbing the silent masses of their indifference; even their apathy can't be theirs. Hence the increasingly louder cries for active citizenship. This appeal to a moral responsibility, however, is largely defined in terms of effectuating policies, not in terms of co-designing or judging them. Transactions are mere quasi-mutualities in giving and taking, new acts of sociality without genuinely sharing power. Ironically, activities from concerned citizens remain unnoticed or unwanted by politics (Basten 2002; Marres 2005; Verhoeven 2009).

Emotion and vitalism

Another approach to address masses is to appeal to emotions and dismiss knowledge or reason altogether. Seeking to represent *vox populi*, politicians reach out to tribes and try to establish an artificial sense of kinship. Maffesoli (1996) claims that mass culture has disintegrated and that social existence is conducted through fragmented tribal groupings, with a collective feeling of *puissance*. *Puissance*, as the inherent energy and vital force of the people, is opposite to *pouvoir*, the power of institutions. As Baudrillard, Maffesoli doesn't see the twentieth century masses in terms of the proletariat or other classes, but as the people without a logic of identity or a precise goal (in fact, both say that sociology is unable to define masses, because the traditional categories for describing them have either become obsolete or proven inadequate to begin with). These masses aren't subject to any historical movement and the tribes that crystallize from them are unstable.

Maffesoli is interested in the untidy aspect of sociality and social configurations that go beyond individualism, “in other words, the undefined mass, the faceless crowd and the tribalism consisting of a patchwork of small local entities” (p. 9). He coins this most recent period the emphatic period, marked by the lack of differentiation and the loss in a collective subject. In this period we witness politicians becoming mediators of emotions, trying to connect to aesthetic tribes and tap into their vitalism. They happily join the self representation circus one might even call hedonistic.

Political intellectuals who measure with the yardstick of the ‘project’ will find the ambiguity and monstrosity of the masses always proof of their incapability of being something else. But masses, claims Maffesoli, are self-sufficient; they aren’t finalized, have no goals or projects, and don’t even need political intellectuals. In fact, their “sole *raison d’être* is a preoccupation with the collective present” (p. 75).

Can the social be represented?

The problem of representation is also felt in democracy. As In ‘t Veld (2007) puts it, democracy suffers from its own success. Its representational form was useful in times when the scale of society was small, but it has currently become obsolete. Politicians who seek to represent a general public turn their backs on citizens who actively put forward their issues, arguing that these issues are particular (instead of general) and motivated by self-interest (as opposed to public interest). Indeed, as Mouffe (2007) points out, we live in a time that is characterized by our incapacity to think politically. This, she presumes, is due to the uncontested hegemony of liberalism. As she defines liberalism, it “is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to grasp adequately the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails” (p. 2). In a rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason, the political dimension of choice and decision naturally is a blind spot. The liberal understanding of pluralism is that the many values and perspectives, although largely unknown due to empirical limitations, add up to some harmonious ensemble (Mouffe 2007). However, the political ambition to represent a general public that in turn represents this ensemble, is based on two dangerous abstractions, namely of the general public and of democracy.

Up-scaling social groups to such a vague conglomerate as a ‘general public’, has led to the creation of masses and the loss of the political. Masses don’t make choices, Baudrillard analyses; they don’t create difference, but indifference. And they’ve never been consciously politically or historically engaged, other than to leave everything in the lurch in full irresponsibility. A general public, in short, will not concern itself with anything other than the platitude of normal life. Addressing a general public equals setting this platitude as the standard and therewith making the stage for politics smaller. This is, however, not what politicians usually mean

to do. In a baudrillardian logic, they'll make a comeback, but in grotesque forms. Masses don't reinterpret messages using their own codes: they simply don't care about codes. They accept everything and transform it *en bloc* into the spectacular, without needing a different code, a meaning or fundamental resistance. The masses display hyper conformity. They let everything slide into an undefined sphere. But our society isn't ready to embrace its grievance over the loss of the real, of the power and, inherently, the loss of the social itself. We try to escape through an artificial revival of codes. This is a doubling of the representation: power survives only to conceal that it has vanished.

The second dangerous abstraction involves democracy. Marres (2005) wonders why political democracy is so often conceived of as an "architecture that remains unaffected by the issues that are processed in such a virtual edifice" and that it "is mostly assumed to be dedicated to the realisation of ideals ... such as popular sovereignty, the inclusive community, or the public use of reason" (p. 136). Neglect of the effects of issues and consequent social reconfigurations results in poor handling of social concerns. In 't Veld (2007) analyses this poor handling as the lack of attention for the intensity of a preference and also as the outcome of Arrow's paradox which leads to decisions nobody understands, although they were based on rational arguments. This is in line with Mouffe's above referred to conclusion about liberalism's incapacity to think politically. What's at stake is what Mouffe labels an agonistic struggle between opposing hegemonic projects that can never be reconciled rationally, but that are at the same time contained in the belief that a democracy is the best choice. A democracy that doesn't deal with real people and real issues is a danger to itself, because disappointment in democracy will turn agonistic struggles into antagonistic ones, as people are either excluded or exit on their own choice.

Towards a knowledge democracy

Some say the demos that deliberated at forehand has dissolved into masses that don't care for reasoning. Others are more optimistic. They focus on new methods for knowledge production about the social and develop tools to analyse narratives as the action and reflection of meaning production. Among them is me and I try to connect these new methods to democracy. If we compare social sciences with democracy, we'll see that democracy is a closed questionnaire citizens can choose one answer from every once in a while. This has for a long time also been the dominant method in sociology. But the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is colliding, offering possibilities to engage larger amounts of participants in research with the same depth earlier reserved for small scale analysis (Thrift 2006). New research methods, so I claim, provide us with new building blocks for a knowledge democracy: they give us insight into degrees of involvement, ranges of meaning production on an emotional and interpretative level, and

varieties of concepts of truth. New ways of knowledge production can lead to new decision-making rationales based on scales of involvement.

The public

The crisis in social sciences is largely due to the empirical practice of parsing social reality into fixed entities with variable qualities. Causality, then, is attributed to variables, not agents. Various microsociologies, to the contrary, have focused on social processes, and branchings and turnings of interactions, but the main empirical traditions of sociology ignore process altogether (Abbott, 1992). This is the heritage of the ambiguous origins of sociology. To bring the two roads together, I propose neither a microsociology nor a macrosociology, but a mesosociology based on the mediating level of a public (e.g., Dijstelbloem, 2008; Marres, 2005; Verhoeven, 2009). Public, as opposed to private, means out in the open and involving more than one. As it's impossible for social sciences to describe 'the public', I suggest a different scale and the possibility of multiple, coexisting 'publics'. A public is neither a demos nor a mass or a tribe. A demos is a predefined community that holds negotiating and decision-making powers. For its success, it depends on its scale. Too large a demos will lose its cohesive 'us'. A mass isn't a community, it's an indefinable entity that represents nothing and can't be represented. Its scale is endless because it relies on negative definitions (it isn't a demos, or a nation, a village, the Irish, the one-eyed, and so on). To define an appropriate scale, the notion of 'publics' can be helpful. A public isn't a demos, for it's defined after an event. It's not a mass either, for it can actually be defined. And it's not a tribe, for it has an action perspective. The notion of 'public' is the outcome of a renewed interest in pragmatist thinking about democracy and is defined as: "all of those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" (Dewey 1927, as cited in Verhoeven 2009, p. 73). Analysing the debate between Lippmann and Dewey, Marres remarks that for both it's "precisely when existing institutional forms don't provide an adequate framework for the settlement of issues that publics must become involved" (p. 165). She also observes that they appreciate the failure to contain politics in available democratic procedures and subject definitions positively, because these bring to light insufficiencies of current institutional arrangements. This means that an outburst of collective grief, for instance after the death of Lady Diana, can be interpreted as the formation of a public. It certainly gave rise to a debate about the British monarchy. However, a public hasn't been formed, since there was no public involvement in this debate. At most, some members of the royalty became worried, but in the end there was no insufficiency of institutional arrangements.

Complex issues enable public involvement in politics. But it does more, since it solves a sociological Ouroboros. Traditionally, the matter of who is to be studied, is decided at forehand and therefore also forms the focus and outcome of the ana-

lysis. People respond from the perspective they were invited to speak from. This is most visible in *a priori* categories, where race, social class and gender seem to explain or negate conditions rather than that they're assumed to be possibly effected by other variables. Persons don't seem to matter. The criterion for the selection of respondents to be considered representatives of a group is established before the actual group they're supposed to represent is defined. All boundaries we draw are artificial, prompted by our research interest. We therefore only find, as it were, the representatives we were looking for. This is a puzzle of circularity which a post analysis of groupings in terms of publics can help us solve.

Researching publics

If we want to research a public, we need to establish what it is that connects people in a public. Our first task then is to identify a public. Some authors (e.g., Verhoeven, 2009) presume that a public is activated by collective actors. They suggest that the actors are not part of the same public and that publics are homogeneous as far as their choice of collective actor is concerned. Others (e.g., Dijstelbloem, 2008) consider that a public consists of all those involved in an event or issue, suggesting that a public can be very heterogeneous in background and level of involvement; the motives of all those who make up the public can also be very heterogeneous, up to a degree of inherent antagonism and mutual exclusion (e.g., Marres, 2005). I'll use a general description of the public and take as my starting point that the outlines of a public are defined by the people involved in an event. This raises some methodological issues (for instance: what precisely is an event?) I won't go into here. Suffice it to say that I suggest that patterns in narrative data can inform us of events, which in turn can be used as attractors to further investigate the public concerned.

Complex adaptive systems

A public is an entity without a central intelligence, that is: it isn't created by a god, a manager or a demagogue. In fact, it's a temporary configuration of a contingent collection of possible complex adaptive systems (e.g., Mouffe, 2007). As Kurtz and Snowden (2003) state, empirical research into complexity is rather recent. The ontology of a known world results in best practices and handbooks. The ontology of a knowable world leads us to experts and consultants. Both ontologies depart from cause and effect relationships that are known, either by everybody (the former) or by some (the latter). Opposite to these ontologies, they propose the ontologies of chaos and complexity. The former has no (perceivable) cause and effect relationships; the latter does, but these relationships can only be constructed *a posteriori*. A major challenge is that humans aren't limited to one identity. In a complex human system, Kurtz and Snowden write, an agent is anything that has identity. The multiplicity of identities in one agent, for instance individual identit-

ies that allow for contingent behaviour (as a parent, as a professional, as a citizen, as an inhabitant, etcetera) causes a problem for defining the unit of analysis. So do collective identities that allow us to be part of groups (for instance the maffesolian tribes). This is what I referred to above as the crisis of representation and the problem of circularity in choosing the representatives of groups. I think this challenge can be faced using the concept of public, defined as the people involved in an event. Once we identify a public, we can map its inner logic in terms of arguments, issues and perspectives and thus get around the problem of multiple identities by making these the focus of our research.

Conditions for the next level

The strategy for sociological research I propose is identification of publics by way of narrative patterns and, once identified, engaging the public in research (or becoming engaged in the public's research). This strategy can bring us closer to a knowledge democracy for several reasons, because it's inclusive and agenda-setting.

A narrative approach is considered by many to be an approach that gives voice to those who have been silenced or silent. The travellers on the path that was guided by pessimism ended up gaining a better insight into the ordinary social. Their methods are designed to analyse discursive practices and to reveal how people construct their lives around and in the midst of events. The drawback of their work, however, is that their attention for the ordinary social is based on both *a priori* and small scale groupings. We learn how specific people, selected on the criteria of categories, construct their lives, but we are unable to connect different research outcomes into a meaningful network of knowledge. Knowledge of the social remains fragmented. I suggest using the event as a binding variable. Events create publics and these should be the object of our studies. Identification and analysis of narrative patterns teach us the events we live by, the way we make sense of these events and how we evaluate and value them. Patterns in complex adaptive systems and therewith identified publics guide the research agenda. Identifying patterns and publics is a political act in itself. It matters who identifies. It could be sociologists or the media, but in fact it could be anyone with access to data and skills in handling information and creating knowledge.

Moreover, publics can become events on their own, generating new publics. Whoever doesn't like to wait for evolution to do its thing can actually create new patterns. The actions of many new social movements, politicians, and media can be understood in this light. We live, in fact, in a world in which event-making machines compete for our attention, aiming to change our daily patterns into a world in which these machines can become self-evident and legitimate (e.g., Thrift 2006). Living in the discursive practices mentioned above, pre-fabricated narrative patterns are freely at our disposal. However, the patterns we actually live by and produce ourselves are largely matters of choice, although the price is sometimes

extremely high. To be sure, our choices do not add up to a harmonious ideal. This is how publics can set the political agenda. In the knowledge democracy I envision, politicians don't address publics as much as publics address politicians. Representing publics demands a different set of political skills than just airing moral demands or co-opting tribal vitalism. It needs both recognizing and being attentive to (i.e. researching) publics and acknowledging their agonistically unfolding (i.e. researching) meaning production. However, keeping the importance of real people and their events in mind, I don't propose a blueprint for future political behaviour, but I suggest a *modus operandi* will evolve as a result of learning from researching publics. If we want to take steps towards a knowledge democracy, we need to realize how intertwined sociological research and politics are and design a programme in which their inherent demands are settled. My guess is that the key to new political legitimization lies in facilitating spaces as in-between public locations for the mediation between an event and its handling, and in helping these spaces relate to each other while baring in mind their agonistic nature (in short: boundary work).

Transdisciplinary research practices

The problem of representation in sociology can be tackled by opening up research for non academics. As Thrift writes, most methods are no longer the preserve of academic researchers: "To the extent that this has ever been true, it is quite clear that research methods now exist in a web of use which stretches from academe and government through to business and civil society" (2006, p. 12-13). When these webs of use are heterogeneous in disciplines and knowledge sources, they are usually called 'transdisciplinary practices'. In 't Veld (2008) sums up four characteristics of this type of research: academic disciplines are integrated, knowledge production takes place in the context wherein it will be used, the research team consists of all types of experiences and skills, and knowledge is produced in different sorts of organizations, not just universities. But, as Regeer and Bunders (2009) point out, as the term is derived from the substantive and organizational structure of universities, it is less meaningful for other organizations. Their perspective remains scientific. This sounds reasonable considering my remarks earlier about who identifies patterns: access to relevant data and skills in handling information and creating knowledge are traditionally contained in science institutions. But with the widespread use of internet, access to relevant data doesn't have to form an obstacle to identify emerging patterns. Our empirical limitations do not preclude the possibility that there could be enough data to see the contours of a pattern arise. Individual abilities and a supporting infrastructure (e.g., Thrift 2006) facilitate our awareness of large-scale patterns (Kurtz & Snowden 2003). Moreover, internet evolves to a space where individuals not only consult, but also deposit information. As a consequence, narrated events flourish and it will be easier to identify virtual publics. Furthermore, our current society is more highly edu-

cated than ever (Basten 2008) and skills in handling information and creating knowledge are more current than ever before. From a traditional point of view, I therefore believe it is legitimate to restrict transdisciplinary research to science, but I perceive this restriction as being unnecessary these days. Events create publics and all those involved can initiate research, inviting others to join. Therefore I propose to rename transdisciplinary practices to 'researching publics'. If the pattern is that existing institutional forms don't provide an adequate framework for the settlement of issues and a public subsequently arises to remedy this failing, then there's no reason to limit this pattern to politics and to not extend it to science. In the latter case, one can think of science institutions that don't provide an adequate framework for understanding the social and a public that arises to correct conclusions that derive from categorical thinking and *a priori* groupings.

Public Knowledge

Renaming transdisciplinary practices to 'researching publics' is not just semantics. It's to stress that science doesn't hold a monopoly over knowledge and that research can be a democratic way of producing knowledge by solving the problem of the mediated gaze through the involvement of the 'other' as co-researcher. Researchers, policy makers, clients, professionals, and other stakeholders all become the 'other' and can test and adjust their mutual assumptions. In a way, everybody's always researching. In the same manner as trained researchers construct meaning, laymen construct facts from interpretations and meanings (Olesen, 2005). In most research academics do this solo, whereas in researching publics researchers and laymen construct together. This assures that the representations and constructs are co-products, but only under the condition of an equal contribution of all stakeholders (e.g., Regeer & Bunders 2009; In 't Veld 2008). Validity then is the agreed and preliminary truth that arises out of negotiations (Guba & Lincoln 2005), because the involvement of relevant actors in the process of knowledge co-creation ensures extended peer review (Regeer & Bunders 2009).

As it was conceptually developed by American pragmatists, publics are inherently tied to democracies. In fact, they arise when democracies fail to settle affairs. Traditionally, these affairs are of a political nature. In this chapter I propose they can be of an ontological nature as well. But the important part of the definition is the relationship to democracies. This relationship implies that publics consists of citizens. The notion of citizens' knowledge, however, can be too limited to cover the full potential of human experience. Today, the word 'citizen' is used to refer to a human residual that's left once people are stripped of their academic, professional, governmental, personal, etcetera knowledge and experience. It's mostly used in negative terms (non-academic, non-professional, non-governmental, etcetera). But being a laymen in one field doesn't preclude being an expert in another. Especially when it comes to experience and meaning, it's hard to find people who are non-experts in their own lives. The complexity of the problem doesn't define the

public, the level of involvement with an event and its characteristics does. The heterogeneity of publics assures that their participants (academics, professionals, volunteers, business people, parents, in short: all those affected by the event) are all experts in some field connected to the event, be it on an abstract level, a local level or even a tacit level. There is no room for arrogance or pessimism when it comes to non-academic knowledge about these events. Therefore, I prefer to speak of 'public knowledge'. This knowledge is brought about in a joint effort to make the affair manageable by politics.

To reach this goal and establish an equal contribution and fair negotiation, researching publics must be designed as democratic spaces. Elements for the design of transdisciplinary research can be helpful, such as their focus on learning and reflection from a contingent perspective and their experimental and innovative character, which requires both creativity and an action perspective.

Democratic spaces

Changing narrative patterns represent events that reflect (in both senses of the word) social practices and therewith present a challenge to the existing hegemony. In other words, publics challenge the existing order because it can't offer the proper handling of events. Anyone involved in current politics is aware of this, but appreciates it mostly negatively, labelling it as a displacement of politics with democratic deficits as a result (e.g., Marres, 2005; Verhoeven, 2009). But as Marres notes, this detour of issues via a public can also be appreciated positively. Only displacements of a particular nature show signs of democratic deficits. According to Marres, involving publics is a process of opening up an issue for the public (which I call the identification of an event; the researching public can be both object and subject), then actively shifting the issue away from existing institutions that fail to provide a settlement for them (displacement), so that the public can articulate the issue (researching public as a subject) and find the addressee capable of resolving it. Whether a democratic deficit occurs or not is a matter of good or bad displacement. Bad displacement means privatizing or politicizing the issue, keeping it away from its public or shifting it to locations that harm the opportunities for the articulation of public affairs or make this impossible. Good displacement means shifting the issue to locations that are hospitable to its articulation and allow for (re)configurations of rules, ideals, routines, actors, claims and definitions (Marres 2005). In other words, it means offering the procedural conditions for a researching public. Although policy makers can be part of publics, they need to remain in service of the public. In general, paraphrasing American police officers addressing suspects in cars, we need to say to the existing structures: "Step away from the public."

Displacing issues means that politicians or governments don't have a monopoly over democracy. We need to consider democracy as a matter of both politics and publics. This goes against current conceptions of politicians and governments

about who decides what the issues are and how they're supposed to be addressed. However, media, sociologists and, in fact, anyone with the capacity to identify patterns and publics, should be supported and not hindered in their researching publics activities. This entails a difficult but important task for mesosociology, since it must be susceptible to new patterns and publics and at the same time put these as results of institutional failure (including possibly its own) to handle events on an official research agenda if means aren't otherwise generated. It requires a paradoxical attitude: being committed to create productive researching publics, whilst being indifferent to the outcomes. Marres states that it's inappropriate to uphold a legitimate order as the standard a practice must live up to. This doesn't mean that democratic procedures, subject definitions and ideals are left out of the process. On the contrary: to open up issues for public involvement requires a healthy dose of disrespect for procedural obligations, but once democratic spaces have been modified so as to facilitate the articulation of a public affair, procedural constraints are among the prime instruments available to prevent the disintegration of such spaces and the disarticulation of the affair in question. In order to evaluate the level of democracy in publics, we need to see it in the light of their practical achievement and we need to take into account how democratic ideals are effectively evoked (Marres 2005).

In the so-called democratic spaces, we don't so much learn the operations of a formal democracy, but we learn to produce knowledge under democratic conditions. Democratic spaces are primarily aimed at articulating the issue well and finding the proper addressee, rather than solving the issue. It is, as I noted earlier, the public that addresses politicians, not the other way around.

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