

ACTORS AND EXTERNALLY LEGITIMATED SOCIAL SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This paper is about a holy cow. It is the holy cow of rationality, meaning, as such, the retardation of our knowing. The paper goes into the elements "competence", "performer" and kinds of legitimisation that play a role here. The objective of the paper is to depict the situation in science "beyond" rationality. What are the important elements in a science using "non-rational external factors"? How can science arrive at a better "performance of chaos"?

The Holy Cow

In the Netherlands an informative programme on television has as its subject the car. It is the type of programme one meets everywhere in western world. Automobile gadgets, new models, comparison tests and rally and race reports. On its own, nothing special. The speciality is hidden in the name of the Dutch programme. It is called "the Holy Cow". One seldom finds a better example of a comparison simultaneously equally successful and out of place: successful because, in the western world, the car has a very special place. The car is (almost) venerated. Everything has to get out of the way for it. It has a (almost) unassailable status. He who touches the car, touches the "holy" foundations of western society.

Out of place because everybody who has ever been in India - the land of the holy

cow - knows that there is one object, which has a large braking effect on motor traffic: the holy cow. The animal walks literally everywhere, so in the possibilities of speeding are so curbed in practice that there is no radar or police control to match it. For the driver in Indian society the holy cow is a "traffic threshold" one should not cross, and which arouses respect. The cow "signifies" the current of traffic - even to such an extent, that if one really wanted to promote safety of traffic in the western world, one should have to invent the holy cow.

Internal and External

Canonising an object (human, animal or thing) has a special effect on the development of a society. Seen through western eyes, it is surprising that something as random as a cow has the possibility of frustrating (technological) development. It is a frustration against which little can be done, seeing the patience with which the animal is treated. The cow has roots so deep in society, that they cannot be removed without destroying society itself, at the same time.

On the other hand, seen with Indian eyes, there is nothing at all random about the cow. The cow does not arouse surprise. She signifies and procures order in society. She (the cow) cannot be thought away, either literally or figuratively. So one can see that both positions (Western and Indian) are the opposite of forming notions. As a result of both positions the holy cow is part of society. Frustration and function converge in one object. It is clear that, for the car in western society the same reasoning is applicable as for the cow in the Indian. In that way the analogy with the earlier mentioned television programme is correct. The "canonization" of the car involves the same type of process of giving meaning to notions. On the level of the functioning of western society the car forms an integral part, without which society is unthinkable. Seen from the outside, for example from the point of view of change, the car constitutes a barrier standing in the way of change.

A holy cow (in whatever form) marks a special position in the organisation of society. With the holy cow, the switch, where one way of ordering excludes the other, becomes visible. The instrument which "fabricates" this exclusion, is, in the case of India, the classical canonisation, with which the de facto stopping of any change (of meanings) is achieved. In that sense "holy cows" are to be considered as brakes (or, in any case, delayers) in the processes of change (of meaning). A holy cow legitimises the continuity of the existing society. Whether this legitimisation is an external or internal matter appears to be important. In the case of India, the source of legitimisation is religion - and so it is an external (not directly to be influenced by man) source which dictates the running of affairs in society. In the other case (that of the car), the source of legitimisation is internal. That is to say, it is the resulting factor of a societal choice process and of

(democratic) determining, and because of that, less untouchable.

Objective

This paper is about a holy cow. It is the holy cow of rationality, meaning, as such, the retardation of our knowing. The paper goes into the instruments and kinds of legitimisation that play a role here. The objective of the paper is to depict the situation in science "beyond" rationality. What are the important elements in a science using "non-rational external factors"? How can science arrive at a better "performance of chaos"?

Chaos Theory

The story about the holy cow is an example of a situation in which one can observe what the border between different forms of knowing (cultures) looks like. De facto, it is about a situation in which the existence of some information (meanings) excludes the coming into being of other(s). Throughout time this in- and exclusion has had something magical about it. Meanings appear and disappear as if at the whim of a hidden scenario, made by a magnitude, an authority, unknown to us, ie God. And without doubt, mankind has reasoned in this way over the course of many ages. The personal, trusted existence, no matter how banal and insecure, constituted, in its ever-present consistency of meaning, inalienable security - a holy security which stood up very well, especially against those thinking in another way (apostates, pagans, aliens, etc). And it was true: those thinking in another way really thought in another way and, because of that, were also really different. So for centuries one believed simply one's own reality, and, in that belief, excluded automatically the others.

In the meantime, all that has changed. In the first instance, since the Enlightenment, ("Aufklärung") that was the impetus for the discovery of the "social" as a human category, people have something in common outside the religio-theological interpretation of the notion social as such: and, following that, since the "rationalism - relativism" debate of the last two decades in western science and society (Lyotard 1984). It concerns the debate that introduced Post-modernistic thinking. Especially in this debate, in- and exclusion are unmasked as factors that deal directly with the quality of our methods of research ("methodology", since the Enlightenment) and with the quality of our thinking-apparatus ("rationality", since the Post-modern Condition). That means, it is not, as earlier, a divine being, but the methodology of our research and the "technology of our brains" that hampers change. It seems that what we in the Enlightenment discovered about rationality and gave form (and that what, as such, gave the impetus to the development of a gigantic arsenal of socio-scientific knowledge) is, in the end, an enlargement of the "format" of our

thinking-apparatus, itself (Kooistra 1991). The phenomenon of in- and exclusion as it has been used by us during several centuries to give form to our socio-scientific products, represents the basic properties of the apparatus with which we thought it out. And so the results of our socio-scientific research are not factual circumstances in the social field - as we assumed - but "the real observations" of a very simple apparatus: an apparatus which every available "chaos" has to retard into some form of consistency, should it be able to process the information "of it".

Post-modernism teaches us, in fact, that the apparatus with too many "strange" meanings, with too much chaos, goes on "tilt". The thinking-apparatus cannot process, de facto, chaos. Concurring information has to be excluded for the sake of the survival of the apparatus - even though the information might be true. Here one sees again increments of the interest which "chaos theory" aroused in science (Thom, 1974). If one accepts that thinking in its nature is "simple", one gets another insight into what, traditionally, has been called chaos, and it is worthwhile looking for structure in chaos by means of the restrictions laid upon us by our thinking. Thus, science now has, as its mandate, to think out "something" that goes beyond (surpasses) the quality of our apparatus for thinking as such, without calling the apparatus for thinking "restricted" in the classical sense (sinful, vain, etc) or "speculative", as happened with the introduction of the Enlightenment.

Support, Survival, Culture

What is the influence of the workings (quality) of our methodology, and the working of our thinking-apparatus, on the social and scientific "interiors" we make? How is mankind glueing together its history, seeing the quality of a thinking-apparatus, which cannot order without bringing "consistent slackening" in the chaos?

Although this seems an impossible representation, it is the starting point for a new generation of (postmodern) research projects. Scientific, but also social, developments are researched from this perspective, regarding their "coupling-and breaking points", regarding the congruency (sameness) of structure in their chaos.

After all there is both inside science, as well as inside society (industry, business, social- and political organizations, etc) a long list of demonstrations available, which underline the restrictions of our current, standard methodology. A lot of occurrences and developments were unforeseeable, maybe because of a lack of data. But factually we are not concerned with missing data in the classical sense. The epistemologists ("bricoleurs epistemologique") here offer convincing pleaders (Bachelard 1949, Foucault 1971, Lyotard 1984). The obstacle is not the lack of data, but the application of what has been imagined already. To arrive at changes

it is necessary to offer epistemological resistance because every development in the end seems to petrify so that it adheres to the once so unequalled notion or picture.

In our research programme in Amsterdam 1) this epistemological resistance finds its expression in the development of a number of elements. It concerns elements like "survival"; "support"; "internal" and "external"; "slackening into notion"; "legitimising"; "local knowledge" ("interior", "culture" and such); "competence" (to go from one interior to another) and "work space" (space in which one eliminates in- and exclusion). This is done in a number of field-bound research projects 2). It concerns projects in which a supporting language (a performance-language) is developed which enables users to converse with the exclusion of the usually attendant "holy cows" (in the problem fields concerned). It is about a "language" which has to possess the quality of giving a "performance of the chaos" (with the meaning of making a representation, knowing that a representation has been made). It is about a language for describing both a route which one has to travel, as well as acts one has to perform to gain access to what our culture discerns from others (our local survival knowledge). How can one make the switch from what one knows to what has been excluded by the very act of knowing?

It is a matter which goes further than the matter which at a certain time one tried to order with meta theoretical thinking. Since the discussion about rationalism and relativism, it has become clear that, if one is willing to reckon with a local validity of knowledge, and not to fall in the trap of a type of absolute relativism, one must look for progress in the connection between - and not a doubling of histories. There is a need for a methodology of actors (with the meaning of "performers"), which has as its task to make the connections (to "perform") between local histories, to see where these local histories can be discerned from chaos and doubled into their present figure. These actors could be humans, but also organisations, structures, stories or systems of control (cybernetics). In that sense "the holy cow" is to be seen as an "actor", albeit a very primitive one.

Language of Support

Which type of "language" 3) we need to express that our thinking cannot escape the influence of local circumstances, even though one knows that those circumstances deceive us, in the sense of containing many "untruths" which only "later" become evident? Which steps should we take, now that earlier endeavours to solve this problem, by means of looking for meta-systems and theories, have proved not to be successful enough? Characteristic of this "supporting language" is (or should be) that it reckons with and accommodates the "disturbance of chaos", which, anyhow, comes into existence because we have to survive at the place where, as scientist, we reside, by chance. In practice, this means that the

question of how to correct our own dependence as scientist, now that the earlier "fashionable" categories "objective" and "subjective" seem to be an integral part of the thinking-apparatus that invented them "originally" - in the first place.

The starting point in ordering these problems, which should control this type of performance has three elements. They are the elements competence, legitimisation and actor ("performer"). In what follows, a short indication is given about the use of these elements. The accent will be placed on representing the point reached in the (open) discussion concerning the possibility of opening up the field of chaos, with the help of these elements, "from the outside".

Competence

The notion "competence" regards the idea that people possess self consciousness, and are therefore, de facto, able to behave according to the demands of the environment, even if they are not happy with it, or do not explicitly know the real character of that environment. Competence means, consequently, that people can perform both less, and more than that environment (in fact, the organisation of that environment) demands. Less, because they are always to a large extent dependant on the environment; more because they are able to differentiate themselves from the environment; in other words: are able not to conjure with it. This latter means that they are able to behave "autonomously" - thus to differentiate themselves from the environment. People are competent "to give significance" in regard to demands made by the environment. To the general notion "environment" belong, in this discussion, physical, social, and also epistemological, notion ordering, (sub-) environments.

The extra power man possesses is that he realises that he is feeble. The last notion indicates a dependancy on physical, social, and epistemological circumstance. One can, in a certain sense, imagine, oneself, the hierarchy of needs indicated by Abraham Maslow (Maslow 1943), as a part of a dichotomy. The physical, sexual, social needs, and the need to look for meaning, that distinguish the human being (as Maslow indicates in his hierarchies) do create human competence, related to the already existing (retarded physical, sexual, social and signifying) meanings - the holy cows, of which man forms a part, no matter how unwillingly.

Thus, a number of socio-scientific and epistemological traditions converge in the notion of competence. They concern, for instance, the discontinuity between observation and memory, as introduced by Freud (Freud, 1950), the idea of human feebleness as a signifying factor in his relation with his social environment (Adler, 1956), the matter of a possible split between self actualisation of the human being, on one hand, and the necessary satisfying of a series of needs on the other (Maslow, 1943), the matter of theory of language, in

which the idea of the signifying factor is indicated (Lacan 1966), and, lastly, the matter of the "thinking-apparatus", which poses its own laws regarding what might be an order (Hegel 1923, Lyotard 1984, Kooistra 1988). With that, competence is granted its own epistemological dimension.

Legitimation

The notion of legitimation depends upon the idea of different sorts of control of the system of retardation. In the process, legitimation, as such, signifies the element of "social gravitation" ie, a shared need for survival. In legitimation, competence is heteronomous to the laws of daily existence. In legitimation one rediscovers the control of the ordering of survival. In this manner, legitimation is the power which socializes chaotic competence. One could assert that self consciousness looks for a way of "exploiting" the humanly possible, when social process is "corrected" for and by its contribution to the survival of the species, ie those who possess self consciousness.

In the example of the holy cow one sees this correction becoming a form of canonisation of objects, which thus become "actors of ultimate retardation". In the project, experiments are under way which explore further ideas about the nature of legitimation. So the development of the notions internal and external is expressed. Historically, one sees the place of legitimation moving from an external position towards an internal one, and, lately, achieving, in Post-modernism, an external position - although a different one than the traditional.

In the case of the example of the Indian holy cow one sees the characteristics of the classical external form of legitimation: (1) The source of legitimation is doctrine/belief; (2) the source is external, outside the direct control of mankind; (3) the relation one maintains with the source is by means of vocated beings, one is mediated, (one "believes"); (4) control of the development of knowledge is traditional, meaning that the change (the development of knowledge) is in the hands of those who are indicated as sustaining contact with the source, and (5) survival usually is formulated in terms of being blessed, so to say, earning a "life after death".

Later in history (here the example of the car is completely appropriate), a less unaffected form of legitimation appears. In the "modern age", legitimation is obtained from science. The source of such legitimation, drawn from knowledge of human behaviour, is essential. This became the fashionable source in the West, following the Enlightenment. Its characteristics are: (1) The source consists of what science (rationality) has indicated as being "good" for the survival of mankind; (2) the source is internal, under the direct control of mankind; (3) the relation one maintains with this source is by means of science, and, as with

religion, it is mediated; (4) control of the development of knowledge usually is democratic - that is to say, is in the hands of the same being (object of knowing); and (5) survival usually is defined in terms of the correct (and honest) use of the available means.

Externally Legitimated Systems

In line with these developments - and acting in line with the principles of Post-modern thinking - in Amsterdam we now look towards the next phase in the process of legitimisation. This involves looking for the relation between our knowledge and chaos. As a source of legitimisation, the principle of "renouncing rules" (Lyotard's legitimisation by paralogy, Lyotard 1984) functions here. The problem of this new legitimisation concerns the datum that, with the installing of internal legitimisation in modern science, a next sort of petrification seems to emerge. Now that everybody is able to work with the same (legitimised) standard methodology, and everybody brings this instrument to bear, from their own physical, social and epistemological position, an enormous "scrapping" of reality comes into being. It is exactly this internal legitimisation which makes it possible to form again and again and anew the "same (equally) valued" sets, with the same methodology, according to whatever (regardless of the particular) interest, power or perspective.

And with that, knowing becomes perverted (Lyotard, 1984), which means that it falls into the hands of the most powerful (the richest). Democracy is no match for this "random" way of producing of knowledge because it is an instrument using a language that obeys the laws of (the traditional idea of) the social.

The discovery of rationality as a characteristic of the thinking-apparatus, itself, is important in regard to this new phase in the matter of legitimisation. As a result of the discovery of some of the workings of the mind, the "exploitation" of reason by the richest should end. One can now "prove" that it is not the human spirit (rationality) which can provide legitimisation for what is, thinking out, about social contraptions. One can only draw legitimisation from "acting" with "connections" laid between all these isles of knowing - and one has to land to be able to get legitimisation out of its "internal" impasse. With that, one arrives at the heart of contemporary discussion. This is concerned with the development of (the element of) the methodology of the "actor" ("performer")

Circularity and Time

How does one "governs" the development of local communities of knowing, which - each using the same methodology - are lost in total distress?

In the story of the holy cow there is one element that has not yet been mentioned. This concerns what I have called the "ice-canoe" programme (Kooistra 1991). One can freeze water to form a vehicle in order to navigate on the same water. This I call "condensing". The lesson from this is that thinking about a means of condensing is a central notion under influence of the relation between competence and local legitimisation. In condensing concepts, one freezes the same material that one has to cross into a vehicle by means of which one is able to cross it. The metaphor stresses the idea that we are paddling, in an ice canoe, across the pond of our lack of knowledge. The image of the ice-canoe emphasises both circularity and time.

In the ice-canoe, circularity (of matter, of rules, of making, of notions) is converted into distance in time (in casu-linear). This process makes an instrument with which we are able to linearize our personal experience, that is, "to flatten" it into something (knowledge) which is resistant to death - resistant in the sense "the passing on of knowledge for survival". Although one cannot prevent one's own death, it is possible for one's knowledge to survive beyond (one's own) death.

Here external and internal legitimisation touch. Life after death, which formed (traditionally) the external legitimisation for action, is replaced by knowledge to aid the survival of those coming after us. This knowledge of how to survive is principally internal (contains that which we, by means of scientific knowledge, know, and learn about our selves - and the earth), but is again introduced externally. This, again, feeds the idea that "actors" must always be found (construed), who are able to introduce "elsewhere" what has been collected about the knowledge to survive by a local community of knowing.

The forming of the idea has come this far. At the top of this paper is printed (in very small letters) "workspacevienna". It is yet to be judged how far this particular ice-canoe travels on the lake of expertise present here.

The scale at which this happens is decisive. Looking back in history, one can conclude that such "chaos performing actors" have existed for a long time. However, they take very crude forms (religion, education, science) and manipulate imprecise instruments. The lesson of modern science is ultimately that the "whole" - distilled by rationality out of chaos - does not exist. This means that the limits to what our thinking permits can be looked for in the externalisations which border chaos ("smaller entities", "shorter time of existence in force", "infinite differentiation", etc) in relation to our knowledge, collected internally, about the survival of the species (within the possibilities afforded by our planet). A methodology can be found (especially in combination with cooperative technology) which makes it possible to reduce retardation. In the end, the holy

cow need not be, as an idea, a fat slow animal, but rather can be seen as trafficregulator.

NOTES

1. Research into the (human) process of special in- and exclusion is an important starting point in the research programme Support, Survival and Culture in Amsterdam. This research programme is a research project at the Centre for Innovation and Cooperative Technology, University of Amsterdam, 1013 KS Amsterdam.
2. See: Zeeuw, G. de, Final report Research Programme Support, Survival, Culture. Amsterdam 1992 (In preparation).
3. Here one can also imagine the information that signifies the difference between two languages: Language - Language*. See: Zeeuw, G. de, The world as constructed by actors. Amsterdam 1992 (In press).

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