A major conference about scientific responsibility, to be held in Paris during the French Presidency of the European Union in 2008

Science in Society – Responsibility in Science
Paris, November 24-25, 2008
Economic and Social Council
300 participants, by invitation

Objective

In September 2006, the MURS[1] organised a symposium entitled "In search of lost confidence" at the "College de France" (see *Science et devenir de l'homme* No. 52/53). We wanted to understand why public confidence in the contributions of science to society is crumbling, slowly but surely, and why fewer and fewer young people engage in scientific careers. Representatives of academic research and industry were invited to analyse the issues, make recommendations and propose solutions.

It was clear that we were addressing an extremely sensitive point, that of the place of science and the scientific system in our society. This question is not new, it has been the subject of debate for centuries, whenever a discovery or invention has brought major changes to our lifestyles, in fact. For quite some time – though rather short in historical terms – science has been identified by all as a pathway to progress. Today, however, it seems that many people no longer share this view.

The issue deserves to be discussed again at European level. We put forward a proposal to address the question during the French Presidency of the European Union, in the second half of this year. The French government (Ministry of Research and Higher Education) agreed and the conference will be held at the Economic and Social Council in Paris on 24-25 November.

Is Knowledge a Flat World?

How can this conference be organised in a way that is original? Rather than impose a predefined programme right from the beginning, we have preferred to ask an open-ended question: "Is Knowledge a Flat World?"

On the other side of the Atlantic, some people consider our 21st century globalised world, and in particular our scientific world, as flat, in the sense that the production of knowledge is no longer informed by local geography, culture or tradition, and that it may consequently appear uniform and monotonous. It would seem that the Internet and information and communication technologies are progressively turning our planet into a flat world, where behaviour, activities and production tend to resemble each other. This would also seem to be true in scientific research. Is it the case? Does it occur in scientific research, culture and creation? This is what we need to look at. Can Europe answer the question? And if the answer is yes, what would be the role of Europe in a "flat" world? The conference will give us the opportunity to study the diversity of the representations of science in Europe, to see if faith in science is identical throughout Europe, to identify the European way of producing knowledge, if there is such a thing. We shall also discuss whether or not the world of knowledge is "flat". If it is, it is not certain that there would be room for a specifically European way of doing things. If, on the contrary, we are living in an uneven world, then the universal scope of scientific knowledge, which was the original European perspective, will be discussed. In all cases, this will allow us to investigate different scenarios of scientific responsibility today and their possible universality.

Below is a list of questions around the hypothesis that knowledge is a flat world. They will be debated during the conference.

1- Do women and men have the same ***access to knowledge***, whatever their country, their traditions or their religion? How do people's geographic and cultural origins modify the way they learn, understand and use knowledge?

[1] Mouvement universel pour la responsabilité scientifique (Universal Movement for Responsibility in Science)

2- How does ***scientific production*** vary over time? Are there cycles? Or does science produce knowledge at a constant rate which depends only on the number of scientists that are working on a subject?
3- How can scientific activity and production be measured? Does a unique ***evaluation criterion*** exist, e.g. the impact factor, which could be used in exactly the same way at any time, and in all disciplines? Or, do we need to invent new evaluation criteria?
4- Are ***scientific and technological institutions***, i.e. the places where knowledge is produced and transmitted – universities, research bodies, private laboratories, think tanks, for instance – the same everywhere? Would it be possible to build a universal typology of these scientific institutions?
5- What is the ***economic value of knowledge***? Does it have a single universal value or many different values? What role will new forms of intellectual property such as "creative commons" play in the future status of knowledge?
6- Does an international ***scientific community*** already exist? Or do we have many scientific communities, each with its own codes, references, validation procedures, etc.?
7- Do ***faith and trust in knowledge and the desire for new knowledge*** motivate young people in the same way throughout the world? The present disaffection with scientific studies appears to be identical in all developed countries. How does formal and informal education affect trust in science and technology?
8- Are ***relations with key stakeholders*** and co-partners in research similar or different in the various countries of Europe? Are scientific responsibility and research ethics based on the same principles and do they correspond to the same practices? How are expectations between freedom of research and social demand balanced? How are the at times conflicting interests and requirements of education, the economy, security, culture, the media, public opinion and politics reconciled? What are the consensus-building procedures used by governments? On what do they base their legitimacy? When and how often are they used?
9- What are the indicators of the relationship between ***science and society***? Are they relevant? Do they need to be quantitative or not? If so, how are they measured?
10- What ***general recommendations*** could be addressed to States and to the European Union for a constructive dialogue between scientists and non scientists? What is the objective? How could it lead to greater mutual trust?

Preparation

France will obviously play a role in the preparation of the conference, but **all European countries will be fully involved** since a major interest of the conference is to compare the different national approaches and to renew discussion on the role of science in our developed societies. Will we find common characteristics, common difficulties and common solutions from north to south and from west to east? That is our hope, which is why we welcome all those who wish to work with us to prepare the event.

The **introductory question "Is Knowledge a Flat World?" will be sent to all our partners in France and the rest of Europe**, to all those whose activities are related to science, whoever they are, whether they produce scientific knowledge, benefit from its results or question it, be they researchers, NGOs, associations, mediators, industrialists, politicians, etc.

All proposals will be evaluated by a steering committee chaired by Jean Jouzel. It will meet in the spring and will draw up an outline of the programme. The final version will be decided by mid July, so that our team has time to prepare the logistics for the big event, the two-day conference in Paris in November.

We very much look forward to this November meeting, where information about ongoing actions, analysis and suggestions will be brought together and debated, and opinions exchanged. Whatever the outcome, discussion of the flat world hypothesis will have given us the opportunity to think about the European project of a "Knowledge Society" and to compare the different – or similar – approaches to science and scientific responsibility today.

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