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Excerpt

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## Introduction

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The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.  
James Madison (1825:492)<sup>1</sup>

The more that deliberation and reflection and a critical spirit play a considerable part in the course of public affairs, the more democratic the nation.  
Emile Durkheim ([1950] 1992:89)

The relations between *information/knowledge* and *liberties* (and therefore democracies) in modern, highly complex, and bureaucratic societies, and their change in the course of more recent history, present us with a multitude of fascinating issues that deserve to be explored more systematically.<sup>2</sup> After all, the relations between liberty and knowledge are not forever fixed. Knowledge or, better, *knowledgeability*,<sup>3</sup> may serve the resistance of the allegedly weak in society, rather than – as is more often feared – cementing the authority and power of the powerful. This study is about the citizen’s exercise of power in the modern era, aside from the power put into effect at the ballot box.

An initial synopsis of the knowledge-guiding interests of my study is best given in the form of a range of broad questions and issues. The main questions I will ask, and issues I will investigate, concern (1) the genealogy of the relation between knowledge and liberties; (2) whether

<sup>1</sup> See *Three Letters and Other Writings of James Madison* (J. P. Lippincott & Co., 1865 [reprinting letter to George Thomson (June 30, 1825)]:492).

<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of my inquiry constitutes a liberal adoption of Friedrich Schiller’s emphatic assertion, in the spirit of his age, that “art is a daughter of liberty.” Schiller’s metaphor may be found in his second letter written to the Duke of Holstein-Augustenburg, first printed in the *Horen* in 1795 under the title “Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen.” However, Schiller is not the first to have expressed a sentiment analogous to similar convictions. In a letter to François d’Ivernois written in 1795, Thomas Jefferson identified freedom as “the first-born daughter of science” (The Marquis de Condorcet, [1796] 1996). expresses with conviction a similar “indissoluble” linkage between not only “the progress of knowledge and that of liberty,” but also “virtue and the respect for the natural rights of man.”

<sup>3</sup> I will explicate in detail the term “knowledgeability” in a subsequent section of the introduction.

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knowledge indeed enhances democracy; (3) the tensions between knowledge and freedom; (4) competing accounts of the process of democratization; (5) whether knowledge should be the operative factor or (6) whether this should rather be knowledgeability; and (7) the sociohistorical context of modern democracies.

**The genealogy of the relation between  
knowledge and liberties**

An inquiry into the connections between knowledge and democracy must, of course, critically assess the meaning of the central terms of the inquiry. Neither democracy nor knowledge should be viewed in a transcendental sense. Rather, knowledge and democracy refer to historical phenomena, not found objects. Democracy and knowledge are essentially contested terms. Sensitivity to the various meanings of the core terms of the inquiry is an important form of enlightenment. But one should not dismiss the theoretical and practical utility of these terms out of hand as a result of their essential contestedness. At the same time, it is important to move beyond documenting and describing the contested nature of the terms, and to commit oneself to a particular usage. Otherwise, one will remain a prisoner of the mere exegesis of the multitude of ways in which democracy and knowledge have come to be understood. A permanent reflection *within* one's communication on the *preconditions* of communication leads to a dead end (cf. Luhmann, 2002a:291).

It is perhaps immediately understood that in any comparative investigation of traditional and modern life-worlds, as well as in the case of my own analysis, reference has to be made to *specific forms of knowledge* and *specific manifestations of democracy*. More to the point, the typical forms of knowledge found in medieval times, the natural law-absolutistic world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or the closed colonial world of the nineteenth century in which the "truth" was predetermined, are all antagonistically opposed to democracy. A society that is not open, or at least not prepared to be open, to social change is unable or unwilling to tolerate forms of knowledge that are preliminary, uncertain, contested, and critical (cf. Plessner, [1924] 1985:7–9).

At one time, and in some contexts, the connection between (scientific) knowledge, democracy, and emancipation were self-evident; for example, scientific movements were closely tied to democratic movements. Images of democracy were largely based on a theory of universal competence and a natural human disposition to democracy, despite the voices of a few critics.

My interest in this study, therefore, centers on the interrelation of democratic political institutions or, more generally, democratic society and knowledge. Is it the case, as Max Weber ([1906] 1994:69) noted, that the “genesis of modern ‘freedom’ presupposed certain unique, never-to-be-repeated historical constellations,” among them most prominently “the conquest of life by science”? Does the knowledge of individuals, especially in the sense of knowledgeability, enhance their liberty? Can we speak of a *knowledge-boundedness* of democratic institutions? In what ways do knowledge – perhaps also the media delivering and representing knowledge (information) in society<sup>4</sup> – and liberty strengthen each other? Does modern science in particular fortify democracy, and democracy science in return? Or, on the other hand, is it perhaps the case that knowledge and democracy conflict with each other in the course of their respective development? Do enhanced knowledge and information impede democracy? Are we confronted with a union of knowledge and power due to the indispensability of expert advice, and might this conflation signal the “death of democracy” (cf. Lakoff, 1971)? Does a “technocratization” of knowledge lead to a concentration of political power, especially in the hands of the executive branch of government, and, in its wake, political apathy and a withdrawal of broader segments of society from political participation (Eisenstadt, 1999:90)?

### Knowledge enhances democracy

That democracy – if only within the scientific community, itself presumed to be “free from corrupting intrusions and distractions,” as Michael Polanyi ([1962] 2000:15) describes it – strengthens the creation of knowledge is perhaps the least controversial, but by no means uncontested, assertion.<sup>5</sup> That knowledge strengthens liberty is less obvious,

<sup>4</sup> My specific case in point could be the ongoing debate about the changing world of publishing, including the function of publishing houses. Stephen Carter (2009), for instance, is concerned about the likely disappearance of the traditional book. Books, he notes, “are essential to democracy. Not literacy, although literacy is important. Not reading, although reading is wonderful. But books themselves, the actual physical volumes on the shelves of libraries and stores and homes, send a message through their very existence. In a world in which most things seem ephemeral, books imply permanence: that there exist ideas and thoughts of sufficient weight that they are worth preserving in a physical form that is expensive to produce and takes up space. And a book, once out there, cannot be recalled. The author who changes his mind cannot just take down the page” (available at [www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-03-17/wheres-the-bailout-for-publishing/p/](http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-03-17/wheres-the-bailout-for-publishing/p/)).

<sup>5</sup> In Michael Polanyi’s ([1962] 2000) description of the sociopolitical organization of the “Republic of Science,” where he praises the virtue of freedom in science, there are strong

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even to those who are convinced that it should do so.<sup>6</sup> In the course of the development of knowledge, emancipation *through* knowledge may be obscured. The growing reliance on specialized knowledge in policy-making detracts from the capacity of many to intervene in decisions arrived at and executed within political institutions.

Is it perhaps possible to demonstrate that the improved collective educational chances and abilities of citizens (democratization of education) enhance their effective political participation opportunities (politicization)? Is it more specifically the growing scientific literacy and affinity to science and technology of the population at large that foster the emergence of democratic institutions and attitudes, as John Dewey ([1938] 1955) maintained in the 1930s; and/or is it mainly a democratic environment that supports an undogmatic scientific practice, as Robert K. Merton ([1938] 1973) emphasizes in the 1940s in the face of the contemporary onslaught of vicious totalitarian political regimes, perhaps echoing earlier convictions as forcefully expressed by David Hume?<sup>7</sup> Or are we perhaps dealing with *reciprocal* interchanges between the scientific community and the political order of society?<sup>8</sup> Is knowledge a

authoritarian and elitist tendencies as a normative prescription and social basis for creativity and progress in the scientific community. In Polanyi's republic, leading scientists or "masters lord over the rest ('apprentices') on the basis of an 'extraterritorial' exemption from the general democracy of the wider society" (Jarvie, 2001:346).

<sup>6</sup> In "The Republic of Science," Polanyi ([1962] 2000:14) also stresses what has become for him a self-evident historical process: "For at least three hundred years the progress of science has increasingly controlled the outlook of man on the universe, and has profoundly modified (for better or worse) the accepted meaning of human existence. Its theoretic and philosophic influence was pervasive." Philip Kitcher (2010b:858) describes the basic vision of John Stuart Mill's philosophy in terms that suggest a close affinity between knowledge and freedom: "I interpret Mill as proposing that the ability to determine our own central values and to pursue them is the most fundamental form of freedom. Gaining knowledge is important for the realization of this freedom, and freedom of discussion is important for the role it plays in enabling people to gain relevant forms of knowledge."

<sup>7</sup> The philosopher David Hume ([1777] 1985:118) leaves no doubt as to the nature of the "causal" linkage that must obtain between knowledge and democracy: "it is impossible for the arts and the sciences to arise, at first, among peoples unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government . . . An unlimited despotism . . . effectively puts a stop to all improvements, and keeps men from attaining . . . knowledge." Daniel Lerner (1959:23) advances a negative case in the context of speculating about the future of *social science* in the world: "During the past generation, [the social sciences] have come under very heavy attack from the new despotisms of the twentieth century. As part of their counter-offensive against libertarian foundations of modern democracy, the Fascist, Nazi, and Communist regimes have officially outlawed and intellectually deformed the social sciences as we have known them."

<sup>8</sup> I will also make reference to the issue of the democratization of knowledge generating processes (e.g., Neurath, [1945] 1996:255; Feyerabend, [1974] 2006) and the scientification of politics (e.g., Mannheim, [1929] 1936; Bell, 1960), as well as the

democratizer, or are uninformed individuals actually a boost for democracy (cf. Couzin et al., 2011)? Though fervent laments about the broad ignorance, mediocrity, and manipulation of the voter have continued to be common ever since the introduction of universal suffrage, never before have so many people been informed about the affairs of the state as today (cf. Aron, [1965] 1984:115–116).<sup>9</sup>

One author who has explicitly addressed these issues, and offers initial conclusions that are anything but ambivalent, is Robert Kuhn (2003):

The usual rationale for spending public monies on scientific projects large and small is that they have the potential to make our lives longer, healthier, safer, happier, more productive, and more pleasant. That science, even “pure” science can strengthen democracy and promote participation in the political process, both in the United States and throughout the world, is hardly ever mentioned. It should be. Scientific literacy energizes democracy . . . and this is an important ancillary benefit of the promotion of science.

### The tension between knowledge and freedom

The issue of the compatibility or incommensurability of liberty and equality, as has often been stressed, is one of the central themes of the theory of liberalism (see, for example, John Rawls [1971] or Ronald Dworkin [2002]). More recently, but not only under contemporary circumstances, the close linkage between democracy and knowledge has been viewed with skepticism, and science has been accused of being dominating and oppressive. Is it therefore possible, on the other hand, reasoning in analogy to the argument of Max Horkheimer<sup>10</sup> – who

assessment of its consequences and the scientification of the self-understanding of modern citizens and their world-views (Thorpe, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Otto Neurath ([1945] 1996), in a previously unpublished manuscript that carries the title “Visual Education: Humanization Versus Popularization,” defines knowledge as a more or less connected set of empirical statements and arguments. The transmission of knowledge is therefore the transfer of assertions and arguments. Inasmuch as the transfer of knowledge becomes more common and general, one is able to speak of a democratization of knowledge. Neurath adds that insofar as everyone participates directly or indirectly in common decisions, a general circulation of knowledge is decisive for a “smooth” functioning of democracy.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in the critique by Karl Marx of the Gotha Program of the German Workers Party. Analogous observations about the incompatibility of equality and liberty can be found in the works of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, as well as in their respective reflections about each other. Cf. de Tocqueville, who offers the following observations about Canada in his book *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (Mill, [1856] 1998:280–281): “In Canada, at least as long as Canada remained French, equality was joined with absolute government”; and Mills’ review of de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in the *London Review* (1835). Isaiah Berlin (1949/1950:378), in contrast,

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opposed Karl Marx in this regard – that justice and freedom do *not* support each other, and that democracy and knowledge actually do not assist each other?

The assertion about a lack of convergence between democratic governance and knowledge applies with particular force to contemporary social theorists of the 1960s and 1970s. Dominant social theoreticians in this era were convinced that a kind of ironclad linkage of power and knowledge existed. The monopolization of knowledge by those in power accounts for their ability to maintain power and oppress the powerless.<sup>11</sup> Are advances in knowledge, especially rapidly growing and changing knowledge that are based as it were on the increasing specialization of scientific practice, barriers to democracy?

Holding issues of globalization and internationalization of political and economic processes at bay, can the widely cited “crisis of democracy” perhaps be traced to the growing gap between highly specialized knowledge and everyday knowledge of the life-world, as the former is increasingly used as a political resource, while the capacity of the ordinary citizen to engage in highly specialized political discourse is continually eroded? Scientific knowledge is no longer a mainly public, but a private, good; and the unequal distribution of and access to scientific and technical knowledge is indeed seen as a major impediment to the possibility of citizen participation in contemporary governance processes. Is the process of depoliticization – that is, the increasingly skeptical view of many groups of democratic governance in modern societies – perhaps the consequence of a growing reliance on specialized knowledge in modern societies?

The threat to democracy that issues from an uneven distribution of knowledge in modern societies – a gap that in the course of the unrelenting growth of knowledge may have become even more pronounced, thus producing knowledge gaps, information overload, and governance by experts – has in the eyes of many observers radically displaced earlier, optimistic Enlightenment views regarding the resilience and even the

describes the New Deal era of President Roosevelt in the United States as “this great liberal enterprise,” and as the “most constructive compromise between individual liberty and economic security which our own time has witnessed” (compare also the discussion on the relation between well-being, *agency*, and liberty in the *Dewey Lectures* delivered by Amartya Sen [1985:177–181]).

<sup>11</sup> Tony Judt (2005:479) substantiates the conclusion of prominent social theorists in these decades: The power of the powerful is no longer based on the premise of a once dominant control of natural resources and human capital, but on a monopoly of knowledge. This applies to knowledge about the natural world; knowledge about public life and the life-world; knowledge about subjective identities; and knowledge about the very production of knowledge.

possibility of a democracy based on a general circulation of knowledge in society.<sup>12</sup> Numerous authors, from Max Weber to Robert Michels and from Joseph Schumpeter to Martin Lipset, have explicated these and other threats to representative democracy. Given the unstoppable advance of bureaucracy in modern societies, Max Weber ([1918] 1994:159), for example, feared a kind of *pacifism of social impotence* of the citizenry, for in the face of a “growing indispensability and hence increasing power of state officialdom . . . how can there be any guarantee that forces exist which can impose limits on the enormous, crushing power of this constantly growing stratum of society and control it effectively? How is democracy even in this restricted sense to be *at all possible*?” Political processes that rely to an increasing extent on the input of highly specialized, scientific knowledge, as Gianfranco Poggi (1982:358) implies, discourage “citizens from entertaining and expressing opinions on political matters based only on their natural competence for moral judgment.” Is the apparently growing distrust of and withdrawal from active (traditional) political participation (e.g., electoral turnout, public engagement in political parties and unions [cf. Putnam, 2002:404–416]) of many segments of the population in many democracies an outcome of a delegitimation of critical, participant citizenship<sup>13</sup> or an indication of new, indirect forms of democratic participation (e.g., Rosanvallon, [2006] 2008)? Contemporary scientists discern additional threats to democracy related to the complexity of global problems such as poverty, resource depletion, food production, or climate change. In this context, reference is at times made to an *ineffective democracy*, powerless to cope with urgent global harms.<sup>14</sup>

But even if a contraction of the democracy-enhancing social role of scientific knowledge cannot be attributed to the growing societal reliance on specialized knowledge, it could be the changing “character” of knowledge – in the sense of a changed understanding of the major virtues and consequences of knowledge – that transforms its role in supporting liberties. The societal consequences of modern science and

<sup>12</sup> There is good reason to be skeptical toward the idea that either the notion or the realities of the knowledge gap or the information overload, however defined, are genuinely new. One has only to refer to the convergence of societal diagnoses proposed, at the dawn of the last century, by Georg Simmel, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin, among others, of a cultural age displaying severe overstimulation, discontinuities, and overload.

<sup>13</sup> An extensive discussion of the genesis of the term “citizen” may be found in Dahrendorf (1974).

<sup>14</sup> The late climatologist Stephen H. Schneider (2009), in his book *Science as a Contact Sport*, frames the question in a different way: “Can democracy survive complexity?” Compare with the excursus on “an inconvenient democracy” in this study.

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technology (biotechnology, genetics, machine-based medicine, nanotechnology) are now often seen as the authors of some of the major problems faced by society and its institutions.

### Competing accounts of democratization

The emergence of, transition to and decline of democratic institutions, governance, and societies always appear to be a matter of historical uniqueness, with exceptional and distinctive forces and circumstances at work. In the minds of actors directly engaged in these processes, as well as those of outside observers, these appear to be an idiosyncratic combination of distinctive trends, rare events, and exceptional opportunities. Is it the case, as Max Weber ([1906] 1994:69) noted, that the “genesis of modern ‘freedom’ presupposed certain unique, never-to-be-repeated historical constellations,” among them most prominently “the conquest of life by science”? It would therefore seem to be a very difficult, if not an intangible, prospect to arrive at a generalization about the conditions that facilitate or hinder sustainable democratic rule, or even make it possible.<sup>15</sup> But scholars have tried; and they have reached a number of worthwhile general conclusions that facilitate our understanding of the conditions for the possibility of democracy and the persistent challenges it faces (cf. Gleditsch and Ward, 2008).

The contention that liberty is a daughter of knowledge appears to find its strongest competitors, not only intellectually but also politically, in the thesis that either the market process itself is a facilitator of freedom or, more specifically, that certain market outcomes are the *catalyst* of liberty and democracy. Both John Maynard Keynes and Joseph Schumpeter, to name but two outstanding minds from the field of economics from the past century, have commented on the affinity between capitalism and liberty. For John Maynard Keynes, as far as vital human activities are concerned, capitalism is not the ultimate goal, nor is it an end in itself:

<sup>15</sup> Among the phenomena that are frequently given consideration, or are even ascribed a significant role, in processes of democratization are certain personal attributes, as for instance the moral values of the primary actors (e.g., Somer, 2011). In this analysis, I will forego the examination of individual, i.e., psychological characteristics of the relevant actors, since these phenomena lie outside my frame of reference – which should not be taken to mean that they do not contribute to democratic movements and to the maintenance of democracies. My interest also does not apply to the much more questionable thesis that the immutable terrain and its unique geographical features are responsible for the political regime found in a particular location: it is not only how we see the terrain, but it is its actual physical characteristics that affect us. Geographical determinism, including climate determinism, has largely fallen into disrepute within science, yet there are also, at present, attempts to revive it (e.g., Kaplan, 2012).



Should knowledge be the operative factor?

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Capitalism for Keynes, as expressed, for example, in his essay, “Economic possibilities for our grandchildren” (1930), “was necessary for freedom, but the activities of a capitalist society were not themselves an essential part of what freedom was all about” (Backhouse and Bateman, 2009:663). In a much stronger sense than Keynes, Joseph Schumpeter (1942:297) maintains in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* that “modern democracy is a by-product of the capitalist process.” More recently, Schumpeter’s elementary thesis finds support from another eminent economist: Mancur Olson. As Olson (2000:132) stresses, “it is no accident that the countries that have reached the highest level of economic development and have enjoyed good economic performance across generations are all stable democracies.” However, the assertion that capitalism is a foundation of liberty is obviously not without its detractors, most prominently among Marxists and Socialists, but also among liberal theorists; for example, Max Weber ([1906] 1980), who sees a capitalist economic order and democracy in essential opposition. To put it in a less oppositional manner: for the critics of the elective affinity of liberty and capitalism, the intersection of capitalism and democracy is small.

I will make reference to and critically examine various theoretical approaches that emphasize other nationally endogenous (e.g., the role of formal education, values, institutions, media) and nationally exogenous processes of contagion, dissemination, and imitation seen to be conducive in democratization processes.

### Should knowledge be the operative factor?

I would like to characterize knowledge as a generalized *capacity to act* on the world, as a model *for* reality, or as the ability to set something in motion. Defining knowledge as a capacity to act – in contrast to mere behavior, that is, habitual action – suspends judgment about what it may accomplish or about the exact practical role of knowledge in social relations;<sup>16</sup> that is, especially, about the ways in which we get from knowledge as a method of acting on the world to action itself, and about what social structures may assist or defeat such efforts.

The capacity *to get things done*, that is, the ability *to do* something in order to affect reality (in an effort to reach certain goals as well as the

<sup>16</sup> As Giorgio Agamben (2014:482) notes in a discussion of the power (faculty) to act: “The term *faculty* expresses . . . the way in which a certain activity is separated from itself and is assigned to a subject, the way in which a living being ‘has’ his or her vital practice. Whatever faculty (for example, feeling) . . . comes to be distinguished from feeling in the act can be referred to as the subject’s own.”

ability to intervene in a context that may change in another direction entirely) is not symmetrical with the capacity to act (knowledge). The capacity to get things done depends on the *circumstances of action*. The specific circumstances of action that favor the ability to get things done depend on the *control* actors exercise over the circumstances of action (*Gestaltungsspielraum*).<sup>17</sup> Knowledge may be present, but for lack of the capacity to transform (e.g., to govern) this knowledge, it cannot be employed. On the other hand, actors and organizations may have the necessary authority, power, or material resources to impact reality, yet nonetheless lack the capacity to act. It will be my contention that one of the most forceful capacities to act is *knowledgeability* – knowledgeability here defined as “a bundle of competencies.”

### Knowledgeability

The importance of the knowledge of civil society for democratic forms of government has, of course, been examined in past inquiries and studies. However, these works fall short, not necessarily because they relate to other historical periods and societal conditions, but rather because the central analytical concepts and assumptions of an analysis of democracy and knowledge are liberally *conflated*. This applies with particular force to the interchangeability of the terms *information* and *knowledge*, and *knowledge* and *knowledgeability*. I will try to show that – taking a cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s suggestion that philosophical (sociological) problems become more transparent if we formulate them as issues that pertain to the meaning of concepts – the separation between knowledge and information is profitable; and, more importantly, that an extension of the notion of knowledge in the sense of knowledgeability is of greater theoretical and practical value.

Knowledgeability represents a broad and heterogeneous *bundle of competencies* – not in the sense of strictly psychological dispositions (as

<sup>17</sup> Claus Offe’s (2013:77) definition of the *state* resonates with the emphasis placed here on the capacity to get things done as the necessary step to implement knowledge as a capacity to act: “In order for the state to ‘be’ a state, it is not sufficient that its organs (the police, the military, the courts, the prisons) are capable to effectively neutralize rival pretenders to coercive power. In addition, it must be capable to ‘do’ something, namely ‘govern’. Being able to govern means to perform collectively binding decisions effectively designed and implemented to protect and promote, through an ongoing production of policies, societal conditions and processes (such as law and order, economic growth, property relations, the ultimate authority of the will of God or the ruling party, particular notions of social justice and social progress etc.) that rulers deem worth protecting and promoting.”