Part II
Self and (Socio-)Scientific Knowledge

Introduction

Addressing self and (social) science, this part reflects on the role of knowledge in practices and problematizations that ascribe central value to the will. Psychopharmacology and sociology are being reframed, not least to account for willing selves.

As Max Weber has shown, scientific progress must not be equated with a general increase in knowledge on conditions of life. Using a tramway, the individual usually neither knows nor needs to know its workings, as Weber pointed out. The same is true for use of supersonic transport, computers, or scanning tunneling microscopes. While the savage surpasses the modern individual in terms of knowing his tools, he is far from commanding a rational account of the world. What is lacking is precisely what Weber defined as the core of rationalization by way of science and scientifically oriented techniques: it is the conviction that ‘principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’ (Weber, 1919/1973). This ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Weber), being the flip side of the Enlightenment, positions human beings as masters over nature. To Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who have pointed to the irrationality in rationalization concomitant to the Enlightenment, man’s domination of nature is threefold: it encompasses not only outer nature, but also inner nature and the domination of others (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/1994). In all these regards, the development of the respective knowledge led to the development of corresponding technologies rendering nature, ourselves, and others calculable.

Coming from a different theoretical tradition, Michel Foucault has directed attention to the relevance of contacts between self-technologies
and technologies of domination in terms of power/knowledge. He disposes with the notion of a subject of knowledge and the notion of ideology at the same time:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These power-knowledge relations are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the object to be known and the modalities of knowledge may be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations.

(Foucault, 1975/1977, pp. 27–8)

To Foucault knowledge is to be seen as a process altering the subject: precisely by entering a field of knowledge, selves constitute themselves according to a fixed and determined status (Foucault, 1978/1996, p. 52).

When we refer to such a concept of power/knowledge with all its implications, human ontology proves to be a constantly contested object. Whereas technologies of internal monitoring render individuals governable in terms of calculability, responsibility, and self-regulation (see Part II, ‘Self – Past and Present’ in this volume), the psy sciences have provided (material) technologies for externally monitoring individuals, their actions, and motives. Inquiring into recent developments within the neurosciences, Nikolas Rose shows in Chapter 3 how their account of human mental life imposes extensive requirements and obligations on the individual by way of developing new technologies, such as brain imaging, molecular neuroscience, psychopharmacology, and behavioral genomics. Dispensing with individual biography and experiences as key factors of a willing self, neurosciences identify bodily factors for the explanation of human behavior. Consequently, changing one’s behavior becomes a question of operations performed on the body, the brain, that is. Far from merely opening up an opportunity to apply novel self-technologies, the scientific knowledge provided turns into an obligation to make adequate use of this knowledge in terms of governing ourselves.

Whereas for Rose the inquiry into biomedicine reveals it to be a pivotal site for the ‘fabrication of the contemporary self’, Armin Nassehi in Chapter 4 analyzes the role of willing selves in different functional
subsystems such as medicine, mass media, art, religion, law, politics, education, and science. Although different technologies of the will may be at work in the respective domains, one general function of employing will is identifiable: each subsystem makes use of the idea of free will for the sake of its own stability. Social systems address willing selves by way of communication that ascribes relevance to human beings and their agency. Strikingly, sociology, too, with little questioning, relies on the notion of an autonomous subject, even though the social conditions of autonomy have been an issue of concern since its inception. This leads Nassehi to conclude that especially sociological research treats as a solution what should be its genuine problem: how the actor becomes an actor in the first place and why modern society counts on the free will of individuals.

In this perspective, practices of attribution can be read as technologies of the will that are of vital significance to society. The sociology of regimes of freedom, discipline, and control has to scrutinize the accounts of individuality at stake. Relying on a concept of power/knowledge, the task is to reveal the co-constitution of fields of knowledge and power relations pivotal to the analyses of neoliberal societies, the subjects they call for, and the technologies they imply. It is a complex of self-technologies, technologies of domination, and material devices that affords willing selves and allows for the self-regulation of individuals by freedom in a society of control.

Throughout these regimes of knowledge – here pharmacological or sociological – the actors and their agency are both subject and object of expectations as to how they should regulate themselves and each other so as to be assigned the status of a morally and politically responsible actor. In a way, by continuously forming and reforming the norms of expectable behavior, the actors become objectified as voluntarily acting by subjecting themselves to self-technologies, technologies of domination, and material devices. The latter spin a tight web of practices and rationalities that do not converge into a fixed set of notions or norms. Rather, they give rise to a regime of calculability (Covalevski et al., 1998). It is complicit in individuating actors as well as rendering them ‘autonomous’ and ‘responsible’ according to ‘rational(ized)’ schemes of possible action. A regime of calculability subjects actors to a general rule of perception, thought, and action – which is one of controlling oneself and others. As methods of governance in a wide variety of societal domains are turning to voluntaristic and market-based forms of control, reflexive and locally flexible control and information structures have developed that markedly rely on self-governable actors whose modes of governance comply with the (flexible, yet rational) regime of calculability.
References


