

# MAKING

## ‘SCIENCE AS A PUBLIC GOOD’ MEANINGFUL: RESPONSE TO STEHR, TURNER AND SASSOWER

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I respond to the challenging comments of Nico Stehr, Stephen Turner and Raphael Sassower to my own article on the sense in which science can be regarded as a ‘public good’. I agree with Stehr that this conceptualization brings various hazards that are exacerbated with increasing democratization of the knowledge system. Here I elaborate on an astute remark he raises from Georg Simmel. Based on a historically well informed account, Turner takes a more ‘demystified’ view of science as a public good, ultimately seeing it as corresponding to John Ziman’s idea of ‘reliable knowledge’. For his part, Sassower pursues a more ‘transcendental’ approach about knowledge being in the ‘common good’, while admitting that it is an aspiration rather than a reality.

**Keywords:** science, public good, Simmel, common good, reliable knowledge

# ОСМЫСЛИВАЯ

## «НАУКУ КАК ОБЩЕСТВЕННОЕ БЛАГО»: ОТВЕТ ОППОНЕНТАМ

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В этой статье Стив Фуллер отвечает на комментарии Нико Штера, Стива Тернера и Рафаэля Сассовера к заглавной статье о науке как общественном благе. Автор соглашается с замечанием Штера о том, что такого рода понимание науки усугубляет опасности, связанные с нарастающей демократизацией системы знания. В ответной реплике особым образом осмысливается пронизательное замечание Штера, сделанное с отсылкой к Георгу Зиммелю. Автор комментирует предложенный Стивеном Тернером менее «мистифицированный» образ науки как общественно-го блага, который Тернер считает развитием идеи Джона Зимана о «надежном знании». Также автор отмечает, что Рафаэль Сассовер предлагает более «трансцендентный» подход к знанию как общественному благу, хотя последний и считает его скорее ориентиром, чем описанием реального положения дел.

**Ключевые слова:** наука, общественное благо, Зиммель, общее благо, надежное знание

Nico Stehr, Stephen Turner and Raphael Sassower provide challenging responses to my own article on the sense in which science can be regarded as a ‘public good’. I agree with Stehr that this conceptualization brings various hazards that are exacerbated with increasing democratization of the knowledge system. Here I elaborate on an astute remark he raises from Georg Simmel. Based on a historically well informed account, Turner takes a more ‘demystified’ view of science as a public good,



ultimately seeing it as corresponding to John Ziman's idea of 'reliable knowledge'. For his part, Sassower pursues a more 'transcendental' approach about knowledge being in the 'common good', while admitting that it is an aspiration rather than a reality.

I begin with Stehr, the only one of the three authors who does not make specific reference to my paper. Nevertheless, he is the one with whom I'm in most substantive agreement. In particular, he recognizes the *artificiality* of the claim that 'science is a public good'. In other words, if science to be a public good, then it must be *made* such – it is not naturally public. Here the uneasy semantic relationship between 'science' and 'knowledge' comes to the fore. We normally use 'science' to mean universal knowledge – both in terms of its availability and its applicability. However, in practice science is available only to trained professionals and it is only with great effort that it is applied to all relevant cases. These two significant qualifications reflect sociology of science's check on the claims of the philosophy of science over the past half-century. Moreover, this check extends beyond the academic implications of knowledge produced in the name of 'science' to the more commercial forms of knowledge produced under conditions of market capitalism. The latter provides Stehr's frame of reference.

I have long been guided by Fred Hirsch's [1977] conception of *positional good* as an economic expression of the psychosocial deformation of welfare states. Put another way, as societies manage to reduce material scarcity for its members, the concept of scarcity migrates to the spiritual level, whereby simply appearing to possess 'more' than others along some relevant dimension becomes the *de facto* principle of social stratification. To his credit, Stehr has done much in recent years to revive the reputation of Max Weber's great rival, Werner Sombart, who had coined 'capitalism' in the 1902 to describe just this process – with the emphasis on the '-ism' [Sombart, 2001]. Here it is worth mentioning that like Weber and Sombart, Stehr is a German who came to sociology from economics and has maintained the same attitude toward his original discipline – namely, as insufficient but no less necessary for understanding the character of modern social life. Indeed, a somewhat cynical yet perhaps accurate description of the difference between 'classical' and 'contemporary' sociology is that the former draws from its roots as it moves forward, whereas the latter simply sprouts roots from wherever it begins. Stehr clearly belongs in the former category.

Stehr adds an interesting counterpoint to this discussion by invoking Georg Simmel's comment, 'What is common to all can only be the possession of the one that possesses the least' [Simmel, 2008, p. 491]. In context, Simmel is talking about, in Mary Douglas' terms, the interaction between 'group' and 'grid' considerations in social life. Basically, he is saying that the price of collectivization is that the otherwise least distinguished person in the collective will dictate the terms of engagement



because for them being part of the collective is more important than their position within the collective. This is a very provocative way to think about knowledge as a public good at a time when, courtesy of mass education and increasing if not indefinite internet access, people have been encouraged to see themselves as part of a common knowledge sphere. Thus, ‘alternative’ forms of knowledge – ranging from creationism to neo-racialism (aka ‘identity politics’) – have boldly reasserted themselves in recent years.

In effect, once knowledge is advertised as a ‘public good’, everyone becomes a scientist – or ‘Protscientist’, in my coinage [Fuller, 2010, chap. 4]. In that case, as Stehr observes, incremental improvements on dominant forms of knowledge will appear less credible in public arguments for future support because the principal beneficiaries of such knowledge will be more easily understood as people already conversant in such knowledge. This means that unless that incremental knowledge somehow commands larger support, it will be increasingly seen as a ‘conspiracy against the public’, to recall a phrase used by Adam Smith and George Bernard Shaw. Stehr rightly notes that talk of ‘intellectual property’ simply exacerbates the ‘democratic deficit’ implied here. At this point, universities can play an important role – but through their teaching not their research function. This explains my persistent Humboldtian return to the ‘unity of teaching and research’.

I will deal with Turner and Sassower more briefly because I take them coming from a somewhat different mental space from me, even though they address me directly.

My basic response to Turner is that I see the same data points but I configure them differently. That Donald Stokes was a superficial thinker doesn’t mean that the approach to science taken by his intellectual polestar Louis Pasteur was wrong. I read Pasteur as someone who understood science’s discovery process as an externally prompted opportunity to radically rethink science’s default trajectory. This connects Pasteur’s brand of Christianity to that of St Augustine in the *Confessions*, whereby discovery favours the prepared mind. And what better way to put people in the relevant frame of mind than during a pandemic! (Pasteur happened to be the first to declare a ‘war against the microbes’.) It reverses the Kuhnian premise that science’s default trajectory should remain in force until the scientists themselves decide that they can go no further, notwithstanding external pressures. It was precisely such intransigence that led Mauro Ferrari to resign as head of the European Research Council.

Turner’s own preferred solution is to construe science more modestly as ‘reliable knowledge’ in John Ziman’s sense. However, ‘reliability’ is a loaded term, dependent on how cases are counted and classified. Instrumentalism and realism as philosophies of science are not so easily disentangled. Unless standards of counting and classifying are improved, they will simply reinforce science’s dominant theoretical horizons while



somewhat restricting their reach. Anyone familiar with the work of today's leading analytic social epistemologist, Alvin Goldman [1999], will recognize the intellectual hollowness of this 'reliabilist' approach. But more directly to Turner: Suppose that the natural sciences had been conducted for the past four centuries with the same degree of concern about counting and classifying as sociologists routinely urge today. Where would the history of science be in this counterfactual world today? Would it be in a better place?

I approach Sassower's contribution with a wry smile. It sounded so much more persuasive forty years ago, when we both began our careers. I refer to the urge to critique and deconstruct the opponent, as if that would by itself result in universal enlightenment and progress. But if academia had not provided a well-paid 'sanctuary' (aka 'filter bubble') for such critics and deconstructionists over those years, their relatively limited overall public impact would have probably left them unemployed if not in exile or in the gallows [Sassower, 2000]. Nevertheless, a more obvious sense of publicly registered failure would have enabled everyone else to see more easily the strengths and weaknesses of these academics' ways. In particular, it might save us all from Kant's unwitting transformation of critique into metaphysics, aka *Habermas Syndrome*, whereby we mistake what is never likely to be for what must always come to be the case. That's the most natural way to read Sassower's musings about the 'common good' as a gloss on 'public good'.

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