

GUEST EDITORIAL: Strategizing Counter-expertise

We know many people with one foot in academia, and one foot in an organization involved in direct advocacy for political change. Some have no trouble moving between these two spaces. Most, however, continually struggle with their differences, working hard to find modes of thinking, writing and talking that respect the task at hand in each. This struggle is addressed by the essays in this volume.

All of the essays here are about the dilemmas of counter-expertise, in practice—in struggles to define reproductive rights, to justify claims made by those exposed to toxic chemicals, to secure a voice for labour in the rush for automation, to challenge racial stereotypes. Counter-expertise is conceived here as a way of taking responsibility for expert knowledge and status, while questioning the conventional role experts play in framing political choices.

The essays speak from a space between the university and direct engagements with politics, to suggest how critiques of expertise can operate in settings rife with demands for positivist polemics. The backdrop for all the essays is a technoscientific culture in which credibility is associated with rationality and value-neutrality, and dissent is overcome through objectivity. The setting for each essay is a site knotted with local, national and transnational barriers to progressive social change. The politics at each site are configured by both particular and generalizable forces, which call for the comparative strategy we rely on here to understand the competing demands, ideologies and institutional constraints that counter-expertise must confront.

Each essay in this issue describes the experiences of a counter-expert at the local level. Read comparatively, the essays illustrate the powerful ways scientific cultures operate to enable and constrain change. The essays highlight the continued need for direct engagements with politics by counter-experts. They also illustrate the continuing importance of critical inquiry.

All the contributors to this issue recognize both their university teaching and research as political exercises. The primary political

task within academia is one of critique, designed to constantly question and interrupt dominant political logic. When directly engaged in politics, the task is somewhat different. As the essays here describe, the most difficult demand is to speak within the language and logic of particular institutional spaces, e.g. court rooms, union halls, community centres, the mainstream press. These spaces do not allow time for the reflexivity we elaborate here.

The challenge in academic work is to find idioms for what dominant political logic ignores, or articulates in ways entangled with racism, gender stereotypes or some other marginalization device. Academia provides a space for analysing complexity, for language games that would not be appropriate in a court room, and for the deconstruction of concepts on which, in other contexts, we must still depend.

Academia also provides space for dealing with differences *among* progressives. In a classroom or department colloquium, people *should* argue about the relationship between race and class, about different configurations of feminism, and about the validity of quantification as a way of describing the world—without fear of playing into dominant exclusionary tactics. Ideally conceived, the task within academia is to question the silences that technoscientific politics engender: to parse the values, interests and purposes that so often remain hidden when objectivity is the criterion of legitimacy.

Organizations involved in direct engagements with politics have a different task, and often work within timeframes that have no tolerance for anything that cannot be immediately released as a public statement. Whatever the complexity and contradictions of the issues these organizations engage, they must produce definitive policy statements and models for action. Their rhetoric must be assertive and suggest consensual solidarity among those represented. Quantifications or causal explanations must be offered, so that problems can be definitively identified, liability can be established and remedy can be understood in the terms of bureaucratic initiative. Responding to these demands is one way counter-experts recognize how power works—not simply by brute force, but by establishing what counts as a legitimate statement.

In this sense, our delineation of the difference between work in academia and work in direct advocacy organizations is itself an operation of power. Our distinction between the academic and the

organizational, between scholarship and politics, glosses differences and hesitations among the authors who collaborate here. We do not introduce the delineation to claim that the relationship between scholarship and politics is resolved, or ever could be. The point is to keep our own assumptions, frameworks and terms of reference visible—so that readers may participate in the multiple registers of questioning that are so important for strategizing counter-expertise.

Easy reductions—‘knowledge is power’, ‘scholarship is inherently political’—are ill-fitted to the complexities and double-binds of the worlds described in this issue. Each essay adds weight to the argument that keeping the relationship between scholarship and politics uneasy, under question, and in tension can be strategic and productive.

By foregrounding tensions between the spaces of academia and of direct advocacy, the essays here demonstrate the importance of engaging political problems in different ways. We respond to various aspects of the problems, while encouraging critical comparison of strategies, goals and limitations. The challenge is to learn from the differences between direct advocacy and intellectual critique, to craft styles of politics that turn diversity from problem to social resource.

These essays also draw on diversity as a social resource by describing work within direct advocacy organizations in terms of collaboration, rather than in terms of collegiality or solidarity—terms that suggest the sameness of those who work together. We need to explore the particular responsibilities and contradictions that constitute counter-expertise; these essays highlight how experts differ from many of the people with whom they align. The essays also suggest how expert authority can be a resource for progressive political organizations, but also a rationale for reproducing status hierarchies within them.

Our introduction to the issue elaborates on how counter-expertise continually encounters double-binds, which threaten to paralyse but can stimulate particularly innovative forms of political intervention. It also outlines questions and issues all the essays address about the organizational dynamics of progressive political work, about the skills needed to practice counter-expertise and about the way lived contradictions at every turn generate crises of identification—with one’s designated social role, as with contending ideologies.

The introduction also explains why we asked authors to write in the reflexive style of the personal essay. Counter-experts need to acknowledge the partiality of all understanding of technoscience, including their own. Reflexive critique is crucial. Denaturalization of their own descriptions is key—as part of the broad critical project to craft modes of expression through which claims to validity can be made, without dependence on the prerogatives of “objectivity”.

For the authors of these essays, then, *Science as Culture* provides space for ongoing inquiry—a welcome opportunity to reflect on efforts at counter-expertise. By acknowledging the double-binds on the passage between academia and direct advocacy, this issue works to bridge differences between them.

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