

2019 05 01 - The science and social relations debate

On 1 May 2019, Scott-Samuel, Alex wrote by email (to around 50 ex-BSSRS members):

Apologies, from someone who was only on the margins of BSSRS, if you find this enquiry inappropriate

I was wondering whether I might ask this bunch of assembled brains for an update on what was referred to 40 years ago as the science and social relations debate.

I recall my marginal involvement with a pamphlet edited by Steven Rose and others, called I think *Science on Our Side*, which posited science as an objectively meaningful category, which will ideally be used in a socialistic fashion. I was also aware of the perspective most clearly represented by Bob Young's *Radical Science Journal* article entitled *Science is social relations*, representing a constructivist view of science.

Can you refer me to a brief summary of the current understanding of this debate? (Should it be of interest, my thoughts strayed in this direction because I was reminded by chance of RD Laing's characterisation – in *The Politics of Experience* – of science as 'a form of knowledge adequate to its subject')

Best wishes, Alex

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On 2019 05 02 *mike hales* wrote by email:

Hi Alex / Can of worms! What is worthwhile, as an effort at 'an update'? Awful sinking-gut memories of so much energy wasted in the 70s and 80s in ideological trench warfare on the Left, around the absurd proposition that any practice – let alone the assembled forces of scientific, technological and medical production in post-Fordist capitalism – could ever be 'neutral'.

Every activity is done in society, in a place, and that place is invested with all the powers constituting that place: ownership (and refusal of), access (and refusal of), formal status (etc), deference and supremacy of many kinds, resources, territory, selective vision and memory, dominant stories. Etc etc. It's kind-of complex. Never 'two sides', always multiple locations, dynamics, constellations and choices. Hard to hold in the mind. Some politicised folks give up on this, and do the 'sides' thing. Some careerist folks – even worse, just do science: Just give me the facts, maam.

IMO the thing that seems saddest now – seemed infuriating then – is that in the early 80s, when the writing that you refer to was published, the Lefts spent way too little time identifying (concretely, in ethnographically-equipped studies of practices) all the many ways in which alternative practices in actual social and geographical, cultural and economic

places, under differing powers, might be constructed . . and some resorted lazily, rhetorically, ideologically, to crude ('unscientific'?) models of two-sides. The theorising of the powers - relations of production, of diverse kinds; and alternative relations of production - apparently was too difficult and mind-consuming and 'academic' ('organic-intellectual' is another frame) to be done by folks who had a day-job to do, whether that was a job as a professor in an academic discipline, a career wage-worker lab scientist, a precarious community organiser, a householder-consumer-second-shift-worker . . whatever.

It was only in the emerging field of STS, where 'the day-job' was to do (academic) theorising - and increasingly, ethnographic studies - of some sort, that this kind of work might potentially be done relatively fully, intensively and with institutional support; and the story of the work that was done, in the event, in *that* place is a sad one, as the workers over the coming decades succumbed to timeworn tropes of career clique, publication filters, disciplinarity and programme-driven funding. Seems to me, the emergence of STS - where set-piece battles in 'the science wars' were to be played out - was a marker of the *end* of 'radical science', the movement. The movements remained fragmented, and the theorising of class-fragmented and place-fragmented practice only got done in . . fragments. An old-Left science-purist attack on new Left RSJ didn't help and, my god, was it in bad taste! Good old Left-sectarian tradition!

At the time, I wrote a review of two parallel BSSRS pamphlets (one of them, the 'On our side' pamphlet Alex refers to). I taxed them both with not theorising the political practice of 'radical science'. And felt/feel that the Two Sides pamphlet failed more seriously than the other one, because it adopted a metropolitan, 'scientific and political class' standpoint. A baby-boomer re-run of Fabianism, as if we hadn't had enough of that? But the politics of the professional-managerial class in post-Fordism (it was called 'white heat of technological revolution' in the 60s, 'new technology in the 80s, 'knowledge economy' in the 90s) were just rolling themselves out at that time, and neither the organisational forms nor the intellectual frames were clear. With a view to enabling a plurally-informed, class politics of knowledge-workers' work-practice in many kinds of places, I had a go in 1982 at reviewing the multiple framings that were available at that time, after a decade of 'radical science': in 'Science or society? The politics of the work of scientists' (commissioned by Bob Young, when he was producing a Channel 4 TV series: *Crucible*). A review of that book appears, as it happens, alongside my own review of the BSSRS pamphlets in 1983: in *Radical Science Journal* 13. Both reviews are attached. Science or society is available here:

<https://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?contributorId=1295273>

Meanwhile, the practice-centred, unacademic, radical technology movement went its own way (with its own science components) and, for sure, did a whole lot better and stayed the course a whole lot better and saw the material ecology a whole lot better than 'radical science' did. Same is true for radical food. And maybe, radical epidemiology.

Also meanwhile, the politics of beyond-fragments and a practical politics of alternative production of prefigurative knowledges (informed by the shop stewards' movement, by community development activism, by socialist feminism) was under way in an experiment in-and-against the State, in 'The Livingstone GLC'. That's the movement-place that I myself went to stand and dig in, in the 80s, and the whole sad story of emerging, proto-disciplinary STS passed me by until I became an academic for a time in the 90s. The science and social relations debate and the fizzling of BSSRS were faint noises in the background: Science or Society had set out an agenda of multiple knowledges and powers and formations that neither of the 1983 BSSRS 'science' pamphlets really spoke to. New economic and cultural practices, in a changed (precarious) relationship with (a little bit of) the State, under changed relations of cultural and economic production - that, for my money (as a day-job), was where the living politics was. And is. I argue that this is why the current 'peer-to-peer commons' movement is the legitimate heir to the two historical 'radical science' movements, here:

<https://www.foprop.org/blog-1/p2pcommons-the-historical-third-movement-of-radical-science>

There are some resources for thinking about 70s radical science here:

<https://www.foprop.org/radical-science>

And some framing of P2P-commons (where 'theory of practice' = Alexander-type 'pattern language') being developed here:

<https://www.foprop.org/2-commoning>

You hoped Alex, for "an update on . . . the science and social relations debate". Hmmnn. Don't look to academicised STS for that? I would say that the 'update' that's needed is a practical one, in changed historical conditions; and I do think that the global movement for P2P-commons is where that update is being made, not in any kind of scholarship, particularly, but in the production of actual, operational forces of production, with lots of associated intellectual labour of all kinds, including both 'theory' and storytelling, a lot of technology and skilful untheorised technique, and drawing on a whole lot of environmental science. The movement will challenge institutionalised 'science' and its elitist relations of production, in its crises of funding and publishing (same old, same old) just as much as other post-Fordist cultural and economic formations.

I reluctantly chose to participate in another event on the day that the great BSSRS gathering takes place. And I can't say I would relish the ideological howsyourfathers that may emerge, if the 70s/80s ghosts are going to get up and pace the halls again. There's ongoing work to be done, often wage-work. The world moves. Some of us do capital-S science, and it's a day job (often, a precarious day job). Some of us do prefigurative practice, and it's in the (typically, unfunded, otherwise-precarious) interstices. There's some overlap - but not a lot? Beyond fragments remains to be achieved? We used to call it libertarian socialism, in the C19 before socialism it was 'associationist' cooperation, today it may be P2P-commoning. The science and social relations ideological debate didn't do a lot for this difficult ongoing movement-of-movements, at a time of churning transition in capitalism? May sleeping dogs sleep. May scientists wake up to the stories on all sides. Yes, the brain hurts.

Warm regards / mike

PS: For convenience this post is attached in pdf. And re-posted here, alongside the two attached 80s RSJ reviews . .

<https://www.foprop.org/radical-science>