

34. Steven Epstein, Democratic Science? AIDS activism and the contested construction of knowledge, Socialist Radical Review Vol 21(2), 35-64, 1991

AIDS movement is only one of many social movements that he positioned themselves critically in relation to scientific authority recent years.

However, while there often are similarities among these oppositional movements, the differences in how they approach science striking. Some movements are essentially negative, confining themselves to the politics of distrust : "We don't believe you when you claim that fluoridation is harmless." Others ultimately just want to show that science and truth are on their side. They seek to acquire for themselves the cachet of scientific authority by finding the expert who will validate their pre-given political stance (low- level radiation is/isn't dangerous; the greenhouse effect is/isn't serious threat and attacking those who disagree. A third category, typified by some advocates of mysticism and "New Age" philosophies, reject outright scientific way of knowing and advance their own claims to experience from some wholly different epistemological standpoint.

Perhaps the most interesting of the social movements that position themselves in relation to science are those which try to stake a some ground on the scientists' own terrain. These activists wrangle with scientists on issues of truth and method. They seek not only to reform science by exerting pressure from the outside, by also to perform science by locating themselves on the inside. They question not just the uses of science, not just the control over science, but sometimes even the very contents of science and the processes in which it is produced. Most fundamentally, they claim to speak credibly as experts in their own right -- as people who know about things scientific, and who can partake of this special and powerful discourse of truth. Most elusively, they seek to change the ground rules about how the game of science is played.

Socialist Review

Traditionally, left critiques of science have tended to focus usefully - on what I'm calling science-as-industry, revealing the subordination of scientific inquiry to the dictates of the profit motive or the imperatives of the national security state. In this article to the contested terrain of science-as-procedures. What's interesting about the form of composition that targets the content of scientific knowledge and the day-to-day procedures of scientific investigation is that it poses the more immediate threat to the authority and autonomy of the scientific community. Such challenges cut to the core of scientists claim to an identity as a distinct profession, whose valuable skills are acquired only through highly specialized training, and whose pronouncements can be evaluated only by others who have been initiated into the club. What are the possibilities for laypeople meaningfully to involve themselves in the process of "doing science"? More specifically, who can do it, when, and why? And with what consequences, and in the face which pitfalls? In what sense is it possible to democratize science? Under what social conditions does science succeed in producing one knowledge?

Knowledge as Power Versus Power/Knowledge

The working assumption is knowledge is power-meaning that whoever has access to, or monopolize, knowledge is powerful as a result.

This perspective, which tends to treat the production and content of knowledge as neutral, could be criticized from various directions. (Marxists), would want to direct attention to the social conditions under which science is performed, so as to distinguish between mystificatory and emancipatory science. The most radical sectors of the AIDS movement. Questions not only who control science, but also who creates science. They concern themselves not just with the old issue of who has access knowledge, but also with new ones like : Who produces the knowledge? and, What are the strategic effects of its dissemination?

Democratic Science

From the Foucaultian standpoint, the political strategy of simply disseminating scientific knowledge in a "downward" direction-creating a community-based expertise---seems potentially naive, or at a minimum, insufficient. In the worst-case scenario, such a strategy transforms the recipient of knowledge into an object of power. The more we distribute the knowledge formerly monopolized by the mainstream experts the more, perhaps, we solidify the cultural hegemony of science over us.

A Scientific Revolution ? A Democratic REvolution?

In the specific case of the procedures used to determine whether a treatment is effective, the AIDS movement is having a striking impact. These activists have been successful in reframing scientific issues as political or ethical questions, forcing researchers to acknowledge the human implications of their methodologies. But what's equally, if not more impressive is that activists also have accomplished the reverse. They have reframed political and ethical issues as scientific or methodological questions, by arguing that only if a study acknowledges the legitimate treatment needs of its participants is it capable of generating unbiased data. The AIDS movement has turned science into politics, but also turned politics into science; and the combined effect is to carve out a large space of scientific inquiry within which grassroots participation comes to be seen as useful, desirable and even necessary.

AIDS activism has the potential to help expand the realm of public participation in a society where lines of authority typically run straight downward from expert to client. However, realizing this potential may depend on the extent to which activist savvy about research methodology is linked with a structural analysis of the political organization of science--the extent, that is, to which science as procedures is comprehended in relation to science-as- industry.