Another Structure of Knowledge Is Possible: The Social Forum Process and Academia

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In this paper, I consider the possibilities opened by the emergence of the social forum process (both manifested at the global level in the World Social Forum and at more local levels, particularly the United States Social Forum) for the reconstruction of the structures of knowledge. By structures of knowledge, I mean two things. First, following Immanuel Wallerstein, I mean the disciplinary organization and hegemonic approaches since the late nineteenth century in the social sciences. Secondly, and this will provide more of my focus, I mean the institutional and practical features of academia – the research universities, academic journals, university presses, libraries, conferences, professional associations, etc. Structures of knowledge in both senses produce ways of understanding the world. These ways of understanding in turn compete with those produced in other sites, including everyday common sense(s), journalism, think tanks, the entertainment industries, social movements etc. The academic forms (which themselves are not unitary) are by no means universally hegemonic. They are, nevertheless, quite significant. Academia in its modern sense has blossomed in tandem with the growth of modern nation states and the deepening of the capitalist world economy, during the period 1800 – the present, roughly the period that Immanuel Wallerstein describes as characterized by a coherent ‘geoculture’. Not unlike the modern nation-state, the research university starts to emerge around 1800, congeals in form about

one hundred years later, and then rapidly spreads around the world as does the nation-state form in the period following World War II (i.e. decolonization). As the state was being separated from ‘the economy’, and both were separated from ‘culture’, so academia developed ways of studying economy, politics, society and culture as separate concerns, each in theory shaped by universal laws. It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to regard this structure of knowledge as fitting reasonably well with the structures of the nation state and the capitalist world economy. This does not mean that this fit is perfect or without contradictions, by any means. But the university would not have spread along with the nation-state if the contradictions between them were particularly acute.

Present day academic structures of knowledge are also almost entirely print based. Without being technologically determinist, it does not seem entirely coincidental that the capitalist world system flourished in the era of print (the dates of Wallerstein’s modern world system – 1500 is almost simultaneous with the emergence of the printing press – 1450). Printing lends an air of authority to printed documents, which are both ascribed an individual author and not easily revised (nearly all of the conversations that constitute the context for the production of a particular text – before and after if is printed – disappear). As physical objects, they can stick around for hundreds of years. Even before the full fledged emergence of the nation state (by most accounts, nationalism is heavily entwined with print), print facilitated the authority of state centers by allowing rulers to distribute uniform decrees, laws, rulings, histories, etc. Although new media began to emerge roughly one hundred years ago, film, radio, and television had minimal impact on the production of academic knowledge. To this day, no one pursuing prestige in academic disciplines produces documentary films, except as supplemental to the ‘serious’ documentation of journal articles and books.

We are presently undergoing a transition of some sort, of which the heyday of neoliberal globalization in the ‘90s increasingly appears to be a brief moment rather than a terminus. Perhaps this transition is to a new form of capitalism, decentered through a number of sites or recentered in East Asia. Or perhaps this transition marks the end of the modern

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2) Meyer and Hannan 1979.
3) Eisenstein 1983.
4) See Anderson 1983.