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ARTICLE

Governing (by) Expertise. The Politics of Social Scientific Knowledge Production

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Abstract

This special issue examines the Janus-faced position of the social sciences in modern societies. The social sciences explain and critique social life while simultaneously serving as professions of government embedded in governing, policy-making, and institutional reform. Hence, academic autonomy is never absolute but always relative, negotiated within fields and structured by power. Ultimately, the social sciences are embedded in the very processes they are meant to study. Recognising this immersion calls for collective, socio-historical self-awareness and continually re-negotiating the autonomy of the social sciences in the context of societal heteronomies being integrated into their practice, making reflexivity the distinctive vocation of a relational sociology grounded in methodological pluralism.

Keywords

relational sociology, expertise, sociology of science, field theory, governance

INTRODUCTION

The social sciences occupy a peculiar place in modern societies. They are academic disciplines devoted to understanding or explaining, and often critiquing, social life. At the same time, they are also professions of government: they take part in policy-making and are generally embedded in processes of governing. From the emergence of statistics as a tool of state-building to contemporary debates on evidence-based policy, the social sciences have always been Janus-faced: disenchanting the world on the one hand, and projecting visions of future societies on the other (Weber 1948).

Sociology is particularly emblematic of this double bind. Its project of reflexivity makes it not only an observer of society, but also a discipline bound to reflect on the social conditions of its own knowledge production. Karl Mannheim (1960) insisted that sociology must grapple with the relationality of knowledge, analysing how social location and political forces shape intellectual production. Pierre Bourdieu (2004) later radicalised this claim, arguing that sociology is a "reflexive science" per se, and as such must consider its own conditions of existence – or accept its fate as an academically elaborated reproduction of the dominating symbolic order. This double reflexivity of a critical epistemology – reflecting both on society and on itself – is what distinguishes sociology

among the social sciences but also makes its limits visible: its autonomy is always relative, shaped by the very forces it analyses.

Bourdieu's field theory provides a powerful lens here (Steinmetz 2023a). While the scientific field is structured by its own rules of distinction and accumulation of scientific capital, it is always traversed by the field of power, where economic, political, and symbolic capitals interact (Bourdieu 1996). In contrast to academia's tendency to put its independence on a pedestal (the regulative idea of academic freedom, which Bourdieu describes as the field's illusio), autonomy is never absolute but constantly negotiated; it is produced through struggles, institutions, and symbolic boundaries. To negate that and to take academic freedom for granted constitutes an "illusionary fallacy" (Schmitz et al., 2017: 58). From a privileged position of dominance in the academic field, this fallacy reinforces the tendency to mask the heteronomous societal forces that structure academic knowledge production, leading to a universalisation of particular interests; at the fringes of academia, dominated positions are prone to reiterating it as an entry ticket to the field. Elsewhere (Gengnagel et al., 2016), we have described this as the "two faces of autonomy": on one of the faces, science claims independence from political and economic demands; on the other, it relies on external resources, legitimacy, and classifications that embed it in wider power relations which then allow it to make use of the very legitimacy derived from its claim to autonomy. As a reflexive social science, this relationship must be made explicit and addressed as far as the conditions of production allow.

This is not to say that making the social embeddedness of science explicit would counteract the forces at play – however, it would enable their being held accountable, open up a space for critique and a reflection on the qualities of sociology as an instrument of symbolic power. From a Foucauldian perspective, this double bind appears as governmentality. The social sciences provide categories, measurements, and discourses that make modern societies governable (Foucault 2007). The exert and legitimate expertise and experts of governing that excel in other fields because they can draw on the symbolic power stemming from their academic positions, and likewise profit from importing empirical experiences made in other field contexts into the academic field (Rose 1993; Eyal 2015; Straßheim 2020; Schmidt-Wellenburg 2025). At the same time, the social sciences are disciplined by the very dispositives they help create: the rise of indicators, rankings, and evaluation regimes illustrates how knowledge is simultaneously a tool of reflexivity and of rule, in- and outside of academia. Methods themselves embody power (Schmitz and Hamann 2022): quantitative surveys and qualitative devices do not merely reveal reality but construct and stabilise social orders.

Thus, sociology is neither fully autonomous nor purely heteronomous: Sociology in its relative autonomy is tasked with reflexively analysing the forces that shape it. The call for this special issue started from this premise, leading to an array of fascinating papers that investigate how the social sciences, and sociology in particular, are simultaneously shaped by societal demands and professional logics, and how they reflexively engage with this condition.

AUTONOMY, HETERONOMY, AND THE HISTORICAL EMBEDDING OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

The autonomy of the social sciences has always been historical and relative (Gengnagel 2021). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, disciplines like sociology, political science, and economics were deeply intertwined with projects of nation-building, providing categories of social classification – such as "society", "class", and "nation" – that not only analysed but also constructed the national order (Gorski 2013). Statistical practices, censuses, and national surveys rendered societies visible

as national entities (Lepenies 2016). In turn, states provided institutional homes, resources, and legitimacy to the emerging social sciences (Steinmetz 2013, 2023b; Chaubet 2014).

This mutual dependence highlights the impossibility of pure autonomy and points out the necessity of historicising and situating claims of autonomy and access to privileged knowledge production. As Max Weber noted, the social sciences have always been closely linked with the fate of political communities, even as they claimed to operate according to the ethos of Wertfreiheit (Weber 2012). The "professions of government" (Abbott 1988) – law, economics, sociology – derive their authority precisely from this intertwinement of knowledge and rule. While this has been the case for a long time, the arenas and respective configuration of autonomy and heteronomy have changed with the transnationalisation of expertise. Since the late twentieth century, processes of globalisation, Americanisation, and European integration have reoriented the production and mobilisation of knowledge (Büttner and Delius 2015; Heilbron et al., 2018; Schögler and König 2017; Vanderstraeten and Eykens 2018), turning social scientists into "operators of global governance" (Kauppi 2014). Funding schemes, evaluation mechanisms, and new public management institutions have reorganised the academic field, leading to the construction and contestation of autonomy beyond the nation-state (Baier and Gengnagel 2018; Münch 2014; Gengnagel 2021).

Paradigmatically, the European Research Council exemplifies this paradox. On the one hand, it presents itself as the guardian of academic autonomy, funding projects solely on the criterion of scientific excellence. On the other hand, it functions as a symbolic device within EU governance, producing "champions" of European science who embody competitiveness, marketability, and transnational prestige (Gengnagel 2026). EU research governance exerts a "gravitational pull" (Gengnagel et al., 2022), orienting disciplines toward market-like evaluations and impact-driven discourses (Kropp 2021). Autonomy, here, is reframed as self-determined alignment with European competitiveness. While this critique is well within Mannheim's Seinsgebundenheit des Wissens, the social underpinning of the transnational construction of expertise is pushed further by analysing how professions structure European political integration (Büttner et al. 2015; Schmidt-Wellenburg 2017, 2025). In a paradigmatically exemplary fashion, economic expertise has been pivotal in shaping European institutions, staffing bureaucracies, and legitimising austerity politics (Mudge and Vauchez 2018). Professions function as "transmission belts" between academia and governance, providing both the symbolic and the technical resources for integration. This demonstrates that heteronomy is not created by external pressure alone but mediated by the professions and disciplines themselves. At the same time, as Schmidt-Wellenburg and Schmitz (2022, 2023) argue, the social sciences are deeply embedded in the societies they study. Their research questions, methods, and orientations are shaped by the crises and transformations of their time – from neoliberal restructuring to the climate crisis. Reflexivity requires researchers to ask not only "what societies are we studying?" but also "in which societies are we ourselves conducting research?" The social sciences cannot detach themselves from societal demands; their autonomy is put into practice by analysing how those demands shape them.

REFLEXIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF METHODS

One crucial arena where autonomy and heteronomy intersect is methodology. Research methods are not neutral instruments but institutionalised practices that embody power effects. Quantification, surveys, and experimental designs do not merely measure reality but constitute it in particular ways and render societies governable (Porter 1995; Desrosières 2015).

The rise of evidence-based policy illustrates this dynamic. Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are now widely presented as the "gold standard" of causal inference and policy evaluation (Jatteau 2018). Yet as Malte Neuwinger (this issue) shows, their credibility did not originate in scientific fields. For much of the twentieth century, RCTs had an ambiguous status within the social sciences. Their political legitimacy derived from bureaucratic practices and business management before acquiring scientific legitimacy in the 1990s, while their canonisation as scientific evidence only occurred retrospectively. Here, heteronomy preceded autonomy: political demands stabilised a method that was later re-imported into academia.

As Neuwinger's study shows, expertise is not a one-way road from academia to politics and other social fields: practical knowledge and experience in governing is, in many instances, the origin of projects that seek to gain societal approval and recognition by pushing for academisation. To understand this process of co-construction of legitimate expertise, scholarly reservations and appropriations have to be traced through the process of the academisation of a methodological paradigm.

Similar dynamics are evident in the proliferation of rankings and indicators (Hamann and Schmidt-Wellenburg 2020; Brankovic et al., 2023). As Strietzel and Tobias (this issue) demonstrate, NGOs producing global rankings such as the Climate Change Performance Index and the Financial Secrecy Index do not simply apply objective measures. Instead, they too, engage in practices of credibility-building: aligning with established facts, imposing non-standardised judgements, crafting narratives, and building alliances. While obviously agenda-driven in its application, the credibility of rankings mobilised by these civic society actors is the outcome of "trials of strength" (Latour 1987), not an inherent property of numbers. As Strietzel and Tobias argue, rankings show how heteronomous demands for advocacy and policy influence are woven together with claims of scientific objectivity.

Governing by expertise, in this vein, means establishing and stabilising instruments of governance which are based on a close connection between academic, political and other social practices. Their interwovenness needs to be explained by referring to different field logics, making any investigation an incursion into multiple fields. Such complex explanations, however, only become part of the trial of strength insofar as the disclosure of that interconnection is itself part of the instrumentalisation. Against this backdrop, a concept of fields as a heuristic instrument of sociological understanding is especially helpful – not as an ontological judgement from a privileged position, observing from a seemingly godlike view from nowhere, but rather a curious observer's position trying to make sense of how different social forces make pragmatic use of academic legitimacy.

Thus, methods are key sites where autonomy and heteronomy are negotiated. They are simultaneously instruments of reflexivity and governmentality. To analyse them sociologically means to acknowledge the double life of the social sciences: both as science and as government.

TRANSNATIONALISATION, EUROPEANISATION AND (RE)NATIONALISATION

Currently, the societal dynamics we observe are marked by contradictory processes of varying scope. On the one hand, transnationalisation continues apace. European integration, global funding schemes, and international rankings structure the conditions of knowledge production. Economic expertise has become central to European political integration, reinforcing neoliberal governance and shifting the balance of symbolic power toward economics (Schmidt-Wellenburg 2017). The ERC

and Horizon programs reconfigure the social sciences by rewarding competitiveness and excellence (Gengnagel et al., 2022; Gengnagel 2026).

On the other hand, crises of globalisation and Europeanisation have fuelled (re)nationalisation. Populist movements, challenges to the EU, and geopolitical tensions have revived the nation-state as a framework of belonging and governance (Recchi 2019; Rosamund 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the persistence of national logics in crisis management. For the social sciences, this raises pressing questions: does renationalisation also imply a renationalisation of expertise? Or do national frameworks remain perforated by transnational competition, producing hybrid logics of autonomy and heteronomy?

Aykiz Dogan (this issue) addresses precisely this question by analysing in a historical perspective how expertise is mobilised transnationally to construct and govern the Turkish nation-state. As her inter-war case study highlights, expertise does not travel automatically; it requires intermediaries and symbolic resources. Migrating experts seek and co-construct contexts in which their knowledge can (re-)gain and maintain relevance for governmental projects. Therefore, the authority of their expertise depends on how it is embedded in transnational fields and linked to national arenas, which demonstrates that expertise has never been a stable possession but a relational capacity, contingent on the interplay of autonomy and heteronomy.

As Dogan's detailed account illustrates, expertise and its effect in a national setting depend not only on the current social struggles of the respective context governed, but also on broader – here: transnational – power structures in which experts are located. To a significant extent, especially in times of fundamental change in the field of power, the influence of and demand for experts is created in translocal settings well beyond the societal context in which they then take effect. At the same time, the paper, while focusing on a historic case, provides a rich texture against which current-day debates about Turkey and its relationships within Europe could be productively investigated.

Aurélien Boucher and Xiaoguang Fan (this issue) examine the localisation debate in Chinese sociology. Drawing on a survey, they show that despite political ambitions for the Chinese government to "sinicise" the social sciences and to "tell beautiful stories about China", most sociologists adopt pragmatic positions combining Chinese and Western theories. Rather than aligning neatly with either state ideology or international academic capital, Chinese sociologists navigate a space of relative autonomy, balancing heteronomous pressures with disciplinary logics, and thus silently co-governing and limiting the politicisation of their craft. A rather weak claim to autonomy and can be better understood as structured by a form of bi-nomos: a basic commitment to sinisation seems to be necessary throughout. In consequence, an engagement for scientific autonomy can only be pursued against this backdrop and appears as a relative openness towards Western approaches, often hand-in-hand with a transnationalised biography. On the other hand, an outright rejection of Western sociology is mostly employed by agents who are locally rooted and considered dominated in the symbolic hierarchy of the field – which the authors see as a subversive strategy in the Chinese context.

As Boucher and Fan's detailed analysis shows, autonomy of a specific academic field or discipline must be explained in its own socio-historical context in order to prevent false conclusions based on hasty analogies. The task is to understand autonomy in relation to various forms of heteronomy based on the historically developed differentiation between fields and its expression in a specific field of power, that is, in its turn, embedded in specific transnational relations. The approach counteracts unilinear explanations linked to plain dominance of state-bureaucratic or economic fields and invites

historical and national as well as transnational comparisons that encourage epistemological curiosity as well as caution (Schmidt-Wellenburg and Gengnagel 2025). These analytical conclusions invite further questions, spurring a debate on specificity and adequate generalisation, begging the question: Do cases observed really succumb gradually to manifestations of the same field principles at play in all academic fields and if so, to what degree?

Walter Bartl and Sebastian Heer (this issue) focus on how instruments of democratic participation such as co-creation workshops funded by the EU help to create regional expertise as a decisive element of EU multilevel governance. Drawing on materials from an EU-funded research project on energy transition processes of which both researchers were part, they investigate how regional expertise is assembled by scientists and regional stakeholders in practices of co-production. Here, legitimacy for EU multilevel governance rests on specific regional expertise of transformation created with the active help of social scientists in a double move: they provide theoretical arguments for the worthiness of regional stakeholder knowledge and participation and, at the same time, certify the practical implementation of the instrument. The regional specificity of expertise contributes most to easing practical processes of governance on the lower levels of such multi-level governance structures. If experience-based knowledge is translated to higher levels of governance (e.g., EU institutions, consultations, and conferences), this does not mean that it is actually devalued, but it almost necessarily changes its form: it is now no longer actively used in projects for action but merely referenced to legitimate and bolster positions in transnational struggles over the definition of sensible EU policies with a potential for implementation.

Depending on the context in which expertise as a certain form of symbolic capital is used, it may serve different and even counter-intuitive purposes. This heightens the need to further develop our analytical concepts for researching expertise and experts in times of mode-2 knowledge production (Nowotny 2003) to focus on the integrated production of expertise and experts between various fields as well as the diverse scopes of practices used to create and legitimise governmental effects. This allows us to understand how practical knowledge from regional actors is used for governing while at the same time reflecting on the role of midwife often played by the social sciences in policy projects of “co-creation”.

All three contributions exemplify how processes of nationalisation, transnationalisation, regionalisation, and renationalisation are closely intertwined and mutually dependent. This becomes particularly clear when, as is done in these articles, actor-centred perspectives are used that focus on the knowledge policies behind the attributions of global, national, regional, international, transnational, European, etc., and on their anchoring in different field contexts (Steinmetz 2016; Go and Krause 2016; Buchholz 2016; Krause 2018, 2020). The focus is then on the power and knowledge relations producing certain perspectives and enforcing them as valid scopes of sociation (Schmidt-Wellenburg 2023). Here, levels of government that are taken for granted while scientific analyses attest to their reality – and the unconditional belief in both – appear as stakes in the struggle for the reach of different government projects and the associated notions of statehood (Bourdieu 2014).

TOWARD A REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY OF EXPERTISE

The contributions to this issue provide a multifaceted view of how sociology and related disciplines are implicated in governance while claiming autonomy. They illuminate the reflexive task of sociology: analysing how it is shaped by heteronomous forces even as it asserts its relative autonomy. On that note: just as academic autonomy is always relative, the intellectual endeavour of practicing a critical epistemology can only be a collective one (Bourdieu 1998) – for which the pages of this

esteemed journal provide a well-suited platform (see e.g., Heilbron et al., 2017; Benz et al., 2024). We are thus grateful for the possibility of bringing them together in this special issue.

The focal point of this special issue is that sociology and the social sciences are never fully autonomous. Their autonomy is always relative, constantly negotiated against heteronomous demands. This is not a weakness per se, but certainly a defining feature. As reflexive disciplines, the social sciences are tasked with analysing precisely how societal demands enter into their practices, methods and institutions (Kauppi 2020).

This requires methodological pluralism. Bourdieu's (1996, 2004) field theory highlights the autonomy/heteronomy tension and the structuring of academic capital. Foucault's (2007) analytics of governmentality cautions us on how knowledge practices shape governance. Latour's (1987) emphasis on practices and "trials of strength" directs attention to credibility and networks. Drawing on these approaches, among others, enables us to envision a reflexive sociology of expertise that can analyse how autonomy is constituted through or practised in conditions of heteronomy and at times used to oppose them.

The contributions to the special issue show that forms of expertise differ according to the societal contexts in which they are located. Expertise varies not only according to the governmental project for which it is used and the heteronomy or autonomy of the academic field in which experts are primarily rooted, but also with regard to the relationship between these and other fields, i.e., the prevailing structure of the field of power and the extent of its claim to validity (Bourdieu 2020; Lebaron 2000, 2018).

In times of heightened conflict between different ideas about the legitimate structure of societies, their extension and relation to other societies and forms of societalisation – as evidenced by the contested notions of globalisation, Europeanisation and (re)nationalisation – ideas about expertise come under fire. However, the quickly diagnosed crisis of expertise (Eyal 2019) or even its death (Nichols 2017) falls short: From a relational and reflexive perspective, it is more accurate to speak of a shift in the concept of expertise in the course of a reconfiguration of social power relations (Stampinski 2023), which is seen as a crisis in those areas of the field that hold vested interests in traditional concepts of intellectuals and expertise, and – to the contrary – as an opportunity for those with vested interests to open up and re-configure expertise.

It is by no means a new insight, but one that requires constant re-iteration against the steady pressure of an uncritical epistemology falling for the lure of scholastic fallacies: sociology and other social sciences are not external to society but deeply immersed in the current relations of knowledge production and policymaking. Therefore, we join the chorus of calls on sociology to understand itself as a collective subject and, as such, to perpetually work on its socio-historical self-awareness by reflexively and relationally bringing to mind the social conditions of its own knowledge production. The contributions to this issue can be seen as different responses to this call and the necessity to continue to negotiate the autonomy of the social sciences in the context of the integration of heteronomy into sociological practice, making reflexivity the distinctive vocation of sociology.

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