

Making Trouble with Vehicularity

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This paper reviews the value of ‘vehicular’ thought (McLennan 2004) for the analysis of ‘knowledge management’ in the mediating role increasingly now given to it, for the negotiation of collaborative knowledge production between scientific and indigenous communities.

Vehicular ideas are ideas which ‘make things happen ... after which their time might be up’ (McLennan p. 485). To this end, they follow the idiom of Jameson’s ‘vanishing mediators’, though now, under conditions of decreasing ‘symbolic efficiency’ with greater frequency.

Ideas need to meet four criteria in order to be vehicular. First, they must work equally across various levels of abstraction. Second, they must provoke ‘committed opposition’ that can be ‘folded back into the compound mix’. Third, they must evolve, moving through increments of both ‘theoretical specificity and discursive “exclusion”’. Finally, they must be pitched towards an ‘ecumenical consensus of serious-minded people’ (p. 489). Within this situation, the key analytical task is the identification of ‘radical variants’ of given vehicular ideas. Emblematic in this regard has been the Third Way (McLennan).

Vehicularity is more than a means by which ideas might be developed in the absence of any clear or settled views about the future. It is an ideas-formation associated with informational capitalism. As such, its form always already implies a repertoire of socio-economic possibilities for ideas under development. In light of this context, a key analytical task becomes the identification of novel deviations *of vehicularity* itself, in conjunction with the identification of radical variants of the idea on hand. Moreover, McLennan assumes something that akin to a linear passage exists for the exposure of vehicularity to its own (potentially subversive) other. Vehicularity, as a frame of ideas work within and for informational capitalism is anticipated to break up under ‘increasingly intense contestation [across the 4 elements] as the more “fundamental” content emerges and the ideational coalition breaks up’ (p. 489).

This sense of inevitability around the prospects of vehicularity appears overly optimistic and, at some level deterministic. As an alternative, I propose a differentiation between forms of vehicularity: between differing degrees to which forms can enable the double movement, the identification of radical variants of a vehicular idea, and significant deviations of vehicularity within itself. The latter exercise cannot be undertaken abstracted from a field of practice. Rather, such

work can only be undertaken in respect to concrete vehicular ideas. The vehicular idea being worked here, given the tendency towards its use to mediate between communities of science and indigeneity under conditions of climate change, is that of knowledge management. Three forms of vehicularity are considered in relation to the systematised management of knowledge under climate change: vehicularity that is system-inducing; vehicularity that is system-reinforcing; and vehicularity that is system-troubling.

Vehicularity as 'system-inducing' in the field of scientific /indigenous collaboration anticipates an orderly field of knowledge systems. It describes collaborative projects in terms of knowledge management, typically through high-level, abstracting versions of the notion. Indicative of this are projects that create acronyms of the terms, or novel descriptors, in an apparent performance of the systemacity assumed of the field: "KM" (for 'knowledge management'); "KTT" (for 'knowledge translation and transfer'); "KES" (for "knowledge exchange systems"): we could imagine more. Given the range of acronyms and terms on offer to express the notion of knowledge management, a question arises with this kind of vehicularity about the definition-generating abilities of these abstractions. In part, that question is set aside by a dynamic Fredric Jameson notes about the heterogenic character of a phenomenon, such as flies under 'knowledge management': the success of each deployment of the notion derives from the assembling capacities of such

amalgams, in which different dimensions – dimensions not only quantitatively distinct but qualitatively incommensurable: different spaces, different populations, different production processes (manual, intellectual, or immaterial), different technologies, different histories – are brought into relationship with each other, however fleetingly. (2015, 119)

The question remains unanswerable as to how the appropriateness of any given version of the notion might be determined, each answer being something of the order of an event within the enactment of the signifier.

A second form of vehicularity sees ideas' powers extend in the establishment of systems, to the production of movement in those systems towards normative ends. As we shall see, these ends produce no new futures out of themselves but, in Jameson's terms again, 'only another and a different present' (122). In the case of cross-cultural collaborative knowledge production under climate change, this shift occurs through the promotion of one or other semblances of the term 'knowledge management' into a programmatic role. The development of a concrete agenda around that semblance then follows. Examples of such normative-inducing semblances from within the field of collaborative knowledge production under climate change include: 'functional and synergistic co-learning and knowledge-sharing platforms' (Davies, Downie, Ericksen, Neely & Tilstone 2013);

“connectivity” (Bhagavatula, Garzillo & Simpson 2013); “collaboration between [indigenous] communities and the climate scientists” (Krishna 2011); “a fair, collaborative and inclusive approach to climate change solutions” (Ross and Gerrard 2008); “social capital dimensions of networks” (Inkpen and Tsang 2018); “knowledge brokerage instruments” (Partidario & Sheate 2013); “honest brokers” (Climate Knowledge Brokers Group Coordination Hub); and many more besides. An effect of the directionality given by the term at work is that development within the system begins to take clear form. The elevation of one of the terms introduces normative traction. It establishes purpose.

In the process of one term being elevated to a programmatically normative role, paradox comes to characterise this second, system-reinforcing, vehicularity. The term being promoted becomes both an object that is external to the ‘abstract’ semblance of knowledge management – in so far as it secures the horizon towards whose realisation programmatic formulations of the notion are put to work – and fully internal to that abstract semblance in so far as the concrete semblance remains forever a derivative of the root notion. The idea of “synergistic knowledge-sharing platforms’ is, for example, thereby both a derivative of KM-speak and surplus to it insofar as the term also determines the practical meaning of the notion.

A significant element of this paradox is the way in which it generates an effect that the notion of knowledge management cannot be integrated back into itself. The paradox is not simply a mind-game that will resolve with the right kind of thought. ‘Philosophical contradictions’, as Jameson notes, ‘cannot be resolved philosophically’ (215, 127). Rather, the paradox is animated by affect. That animation begins to be felt as soon as a specific semblance of knowledge management is raised to the status of a normative imperative for the field as a whole. In the process, the universalising impulses recede of the abstract version of the notion. Thereafter, we can only recuperate memory of the universal form (say, “KM”) in relation to the programmes of action developed around the specific semblance (say, “knowledge platforms”). Exemplifying this dynamic is the brief given by the Technical Consortium for Building Resilience to Drought in the Horn of Africa on the role of knowledge management in the organisation of relations between participants:

Knowledge management is an evolving knowledge-for-development approach. As such, there is still much work required to create functional and synergistic co-learning and knowledge-sharing platforms that can be used by decision makers from local to regional levels to enhance a resilience agenda in the drylands The ‘proof of purchase’ of the Knowledge Management approach to be put in place for the HoA will be demonstrated by increased resilience - positive change on the ground - that results from a synergistic integration of intrinsic knowledge and practical experience, research outputs, enhanced capacity and co-learning,

changes in decisionmaking processes and supportive policies. (Davies, Downie, Ericksen, Neely & Tilstone 2013, p. 1)

Knowledge management becomes a meaningful object only through application of specific instruments that can positivise the normative ends to which the notion is being put – here, the use of ‘synergistic co-learning and knowledge-sharing platforms’ to ‘increase resilience’.

The holistic register of the term in its abstract mode does not dissipate fully, however. A residual quantum remains of that register in the form of an enduring trace of enjoyment through which the notion’s initial appeal as an analytic strategy had formed. That quantum can be seen each time the notion is reached for in its abstract integrity – ‘in itself’ – yet found to be accessible now only ‘after the fact’, through participation in the particularistic version of itself promoted to programmatic duties. Pleasure of this kind litters the literature on the deployment of knowledge management. From the same report as above:

This paper has mapped and reviewed a number of existing knowledge management components and tools that can readily be incorporated into an overall knowledge management approach for the HoA. Knowledge management in the Horn of Africa provides an ideal opportunity to bridge research, practice and policy in a coherent and co-learning way focused on achieving outcomes and taking those outcomes to scale. (ibid, p. 27).

The supplementary elements that come practically to comprise the object – research, practice, policy – confirm retroactively the existence of the object ‘in itself’ – knowledge management – by whose fantasmatic pull those supplements now only appear but also fall into place as a programme of action.

Lacan’s term for the residual – and troubling – pleasure that remains from the abstracted version of a thing is ‘surplus enjoyment’ (Lacan). The pleasure troubles its bearer because of the continual work required by the subject to have that thing appear as if other than through its particularistic semblances. It can never do so, however, because the object has never existed ‘in itself’. The precarious condition of that quantum is offset to the extent to which the concrete, localised semblance of a notion like ‘KM’ succeeds in programmatic terms to generate concrete activity, to thereby substantiate the discursive space in which the abstracted ideal sits. The development of collaborative networks around a new knowledge platform; the attainment of funding for the platform; the publication of academic commentary on its operation – tangible outcomes of this kind subvert the precariousness of transformative work undertaken with objects that exist only in their effects. The tractive force of applied knowledge management comes, then, not simply from the programmatic potential of the specific semblance of the notion called upon to infuse the abstract ideal with normative direction. That semblance is, after all, but an arbitrary version of the idea and its programmatic potential,

in similar vein, but a mere promise. Rather, traction comes from the trace of enjoyment left over from prior attachments to the thing imagined ‘in itself’, that now animates investment in the concrete semblances of the idea. As a consequence of the repetitive character of that trace – it exists only as repetition – seemingly novel innovations across a given field of activity can produce remarkably similar outcomes in terms of real-world practice (Zizek). The breadth of ‘the ‘promise’ on offer under such conditions looks remarkably thin.

A key question emerges at this point for the evaluation of vehicularity as a generator of haunting hope under climate change. That question concerns the analytic work to which a scrap of enjoyment can be put. It is upon this feature that the final, and system-troubling, form of vehicularity builds. That scrap of enjoyment seems so very little in comparison to the organisational importance that accrues around “KM”, about “KTS”, with regard to “synergistic knowledge-platforms” or to “knowledge brokerage instruments”. It has the potential, however, to put ideas in motion, simultaneous to its agitation of the capitalist-pragmatic notion that ‘the production of movement’ is, itself, now the purpose of critique (Seidman).

Our guide on the possible uses to which a simple skerrick of pleasure might be put is Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of a dialectic of ‘antipraxis’ (pp161-197). Antipraxis refers to the way in a state of co-construction occurs between subjectivity and the materiality of subjective. It refers to a level of material reality in which ‘practice absorbed by its “material” becomes a material caricature of the human’ (161). Two forms of surplus emerge within both materiality and subjectivity from this simple formulation: ‘matter as inverted praxis’ and ‘praxis without an author’ (166, original in italics). The notion that matter is a state of inverted praxis refers to situations by which the human subject finds the contradictions of its socio-economic situation returning as substantial effects of its own actions. Ideas return laden with the contradictions of the conditions in which they were deployed. Such is Sartre’s fundamental contribution to knowledge management. ‘Unanticipated consequences’ is a term routinely used within sociology to express such shortfalls but, as Fredric Jameson notes, this idea misses the kernel of Sartre’s point (Jameson 2004b). From the context of the socio-economic conditions within which activity was initially undertaken, such effects are never ‘naturally’ unpredictable. They become unanticipated, however, to the extent that the forms of political consciousness are not yet available as would have enabled the subject to factor into their actions the likely effects of those contradictions.

This ‘return’ of agency in the effects of its activity denotes a state of ‘passivised action’ (): objects deposit those effects act back upon the subject passively, without intentionality. In terms of political subjectivity, ideas return

as a shared sense of fate (‘ ‘’) in relation to the effects of actions that were collectively undertaken under conditions not of the actors’ making (). Anthropomorphic climate change again exemplifies this dynamic: the continual discharge of black carbon over the last 150 years into the atmosphere-as-appropriated-commons, finds that discharge now returning as mass weather events. Such events constitute, in Sartre’s terms, states that exceed the anticipated end-points of our actions: states of ‘counter-finality’. Most famously, Sartre gave the example of Chinese peasants who, over hundreds of years, cleared trees from the mountainous ‘frontiers of their territory’ for the planting of crops (p. 161). Widespread deforestation resulted in erosion that caused riverbeds to rise and that precipitated a recurrent mass flooding of arable plains. ‘Thus, the whole history of the terrible Chinese floods appears as an intentionally constructed mechanism. If some enemy of mankind had wanted to persecute the peasants of the Great Plains, he would have ordered mercenary troops to deforest the mountains systematically’ (p. 162).

As the ‘atomised masses’ of feudal rule, the peasantry thereby participated in the dispossession of nomadic peoples and the appropriation of nature for stratification-related ends (p. 165). At first, Sartre notes, the ‘primitive alienation’ involved in the traditional applications of knowledge ‘does not express exploitation’ of the people displaced or the ecologies appropriated under feudalism. Rather, and without political judgement, it denotes a simple ‘materialisation of recurrence’ on the part of the peasantry (p. 163). Rivers prone to flooding became, then, experiences of passivized action, of a ‘counter-finality’ born of the peasants’ subservient position within the feudal system. The outcomes required of them by the scarcity faced on the frontiers does not thereby end with the successful manufacture of arable land. The possibility of a critical praxis arrives upon realisation as to the horrific effects of traditional practices now laden with the downstream effects of exploited peoples and ecosystems. Praxis becomes, under such conditions, however, *antipraxis*; ‘*praxis without an author*’ (p. 166 original emphasis).

Amongst the various implications of Sartre’s praxological approach to knowledge management, the least progressive for the troubling of capital is the recuperation of political agency. Agency shows itself able to endure. This is the case even when the subject is confronted with its contradictory existence through the effects in its actions. Each attempt to act finds itself animated toward concrete plans for the future by traces of pleasure left over from displaced dreams. Agency will thereby always reproduce itself – without ever manifesting ‘as such’ – in forms that can be retroactively glimpsed through the effects of its actions. Appeals for the recuperation of political agency thereby suggest themselves to be but twitches of a nostalgic humanism. Such may be useful for (re)anchoring the human rights project now at sea on oceans of geo-economic change, but not for the progression

of collaborative engagement across scientific and indigenous communities in the midst of planetary climate change.

A slightly more progressive version exists of vehicularity as ‘inverted praxis’, as a promise of greater predictive powers. Action can be contemplated in terms of the social contradictions within which a given need to act forms. This suggests that subjects may learn to calculate the outcomes of potential lines of engagement through forecasts of current contradictions within the effects of its actions. Two forms of biopolitical lines of force potentially arise from this, however. In the first, the subject finds themselves disciplined by the need to second-guess a future always overdetermined by elements and processes not necessarily available within current knowledge. At best, the impossibility of this situation may result in ‘paralysis by analysis’. At worst, the calculation misses something that turns out to be important. Hypthetico-deductive inquiry is littered with the effects of dependant variables not recognised in time as being significant, climate change being instructive in this regard. In the second, the subject find itself seduced into believing that they can deploy the riddles of foundational contradictions, such as agency’s formation both as effect and cause of structure. The seduction promises an unbounded condition of progressive movement – of what Kordela calls a state of ‘secular mortality’ – that on the other side, is littered by the lives of those left to languish amidst the mute inertia of scarcity ().

A third version of inverted praxis, as system-troubling vehicularity, avoids these two states of narcissistic humanism and biopolitical inscription. Its progressive prospect lies with recognition that histories of socio-economic contest result in an uneven distribution of agency and alienation across communities. Communities on the periphery of the metropole are burdened not only historically with the contradictions of capitalist appropriation but, also, with new contradictions in the reproduction of life in the aftermath of severe weather events. Experiences of compounding contradiction return as analytical frameworks for the collaborative production of knowledge under climate change. Inverted praxis functions through neither the pursuit of political agency nor the enhancement of prediction. Rather, it haunts. Events restore critical insight to the subject-supposed-to-know in forms unfamiliar to it.

Emblematic of a hauntological form of inverted praxis is collaborative work undertaken by Māori and non-Māori on the freshwater ecology of the Porirua ki Manawatū district of Te Ika a Maui (North Island) of Aotearoa/ New Zealand (Potter et al 2017). The report charts a shift in the Porirua ki Manawatū region from ‘waterscape’ to ‘landscape’ in the years following British colonisation. This change has seen the large-scale manufacture of arable land for individual ownership through the draining of wetlands, the diversion of rivers, and an insufficient level of governmental consideration given to the release of

contaminants associated with the construction of farmland and its adjacent urbanisation. Not only did colonisation alter the landscape “in line with the capitalist ideology of the Crown”, the process through which this occurred also altered relations within Māori between men and women. Women, as the traditional holders of knowledge on water systems (in keeping with other systems of life), found their relation with men dislocated as the colonial government assumed powers to change the courses taken by ecological systems.

The report frames this shift from waterscape to landscape and of the dislocation of gender relations, in terms of the state’s initial development of a specific governance mechanism. That mechanism enabled private interests to control at a distance the operation of ecological systems. Locally elected authorities, populated by groups allied with farming, altered ecological processes on tracts of land held in private ownership – including land owned collectively by Māori – as deemed necessary for the manufacture of arable land. This trajectory of state action occurred in disregard of guarantees to Māori, as provided by the international treaty signed with the British monarchy in 1840 (Te Tiriti o Waitangi), that their continuing powers to govern (rangatiratanga) would include the right to fulfil guardianship responsibilities for ecological systems (kaitiakitanga).

The first of the instruments developed for the alteration of the waterscape – the establishment of a system of ‘drainage boards’ – illustrates the overall trajectory of the shifts:

When considered as a whole, the drainage board system has functioned as an accessory of the agricultural industry. The legislation and its implementation through local government ensured that farmers could simply pay rates to establish themselves with significant powers under the law to continue to grossly modify the land and water scapes through draining extremely high volumes of water from the catchment, at great detriment to the ecology, and associated economic values that Māori have relied upon, and at great profit to themselves.

In Marxist terms, the report thereby details a legally legitimated process of primitive accumulation – not only of land but of interconnected water systems – tending towards the production of crises in the reproduction of life across an array of intersecting ecological structures.

The effects of poor management of water are ... complex to analyse in that their spatial and temporal distribution may extend greatly beyond the time and place that the initial impact occurred It is extremely challenging to capture all these drivers of degradation and how they relate to one another over a large, once ecologically diverse, area. Crown resource management of water doesn’t consist of a few discrete incidences of impact, but rather can be described as a regime of removing the natural cleansing systems from the waterscape in favour of certain industries that were highly polluting to inland waterways [farming and mining], followed by a systemic

failure to manage their pervasive, cumulative, and ultimately devastating effects, which have been continuously denied.

A set of closely associated issues relating to the reproduction of socio-biological life under colonial capitalism thereby emerge in the report: the effects upon the reproduction of life of the colonial state's use of legal mechanisms to bypass its Treaty obligations regarding the care of ecological systems (); the effects upon ecological systems of a legalised imposition of privatised land tenure (); and the effects upon Māori systems of social reproduction of colonial capitalism's dislocation of indigenous gender relations ().

In hauntological terms, the report returns to members of the settler communities, via an unfamiliar route, the criticality associated with social science inquiry – the analyses of colonial domination, of capitalist exploitation, of patriarchal command, and so on. That new pathway is the collective agency of Māori, as animated by concerns about the growing tendency towards crises in the reproduction of life under colonial capitalism. Moreover, the concerns gain tractive force through an association that the authors draw, between the advanced state of that tendency and the colonial capitalist history of Māori's suppression as guardians of ecological life-worlds. Concepts familiar to social scientists for the analysis of such situations thereby return imbued with a normative weight that exceeds situations of those concepts' use as culturally-abstracted diagnostic propositions. They return, instead, in a manner that displaces their familiarity with something of the uncanny: they return with an objectivity aroused by proximity to the contradictions of colonial capitalism. They thereby return with a gravitas that has the capacity to refigure settler criticality, 'as such', as a semblance whose lack of a singular and grounding referent becomes all the more apparent. Criticality as, now, an absent cause of radical social transformation, begins to haunt those who had once claimed its possession.

The mediation by 'knowledge management' of relations between cultures differently positioned by the ongoing colonial encounter, need not necessarily result in further cultural stratification. Such futures depend, however, upon interventions by the communities of science with the normative impulses of knowledge management in its programmatic mode. Such intervention may see the normativity of that concept shift from a hope 'that promises' to a hope 'that haunts'. This shift in the affective register of the idea could occur through a form of knowledge management whose mediatorial qualities (its 'vehicularity') trouble both the idea of knowledge management itself and the capitalism that normalises the deployment of such a term within the colonial encounter. A form that shows itself able to do so is Māori collaboration with ecological science on freshwater management. The capacity of this form to alter the terms of collaborative

engagement does not lie with its own socio-political purpose, which is to reconfigure the field of governance in Aotearoa/ New Zealand in ways that enables the establishment of indigenous self-determination to encompass guardianship of ecological systems. Rather, the key element with regard to the project's capacity to facilitate a non-stratified collaboration, is its return to the communities of western knowledge the kernel of scientific criticality as reconfigured through indigenous experiences of the contradictions of colonial capitalism.

The effect of this return, for the communities of science, is not one of loss. Criticality is not depleted. The insights are not necessarily 'other' to those that might be generated by scientific inquiry. Neither, however, does that make them something like 'different but equal'. Rather, the return of that criticality via indigenous experiences amplifies its normative traction. That increase in tractive force doesn't arrive, however, as might be anticipated. It doesn't accrue on the basis that the insights of the project are more true because of their passage through the experience of indigenous experience. Rather, the normative quotient increases on account of the kernel of critical thought returning as the apparition of which those insights are its context-appropriate appearances. The kernel of European criticality thereby returns not as new sets of propositions from which we might take heart but, rather, as a spectre. Moreover, that spectre is not some romanticised image we might generate of Maori insights infused with learnings from the past, but of modernist scientific understanding as a semblance without referent. Within the collaborative ecological production of knowledge under the conditions of an ongoing colonial encounter and climate change, that haunting stands to put modernist criticality in motion through indigenous insight as its context-appropriate appearance. The effect casts that kernel of European criticality not as a thing in itself but as an apparition of its socio-historical appearances, to be read back through those appearances, and through whose haunting modernist criticality cannot rest.

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