

# **Knowledge in a perfect storm**

**Warwick Tie**

**Disrupting Dominant Identities Seminar: 16 October 2018**

**eSocSci: University of Auckland**

Tis a funny thing, tis time. Two observations might validate this speculatively starting point. The first is to point out that beginnings are always desperate places (Fitzpatrick). The validity of first words can only ever be secured later on, by subsequent content, with validation only then – retrospectively - attributed. Second, we never start absolutely: our starting points always follow in sequence from something prior, objects in which labour had been expended, and within conditions not of its own making. In this instance, that point prior is an abstract, written several months earlier. My work has since moved into simultaneously same but different spaces. Some elements of that abstract remain good for what I'm about to talk about; others have decreased in significance. None have gone entirely. I will say less, for example, about the case study of collaborative learning between the scientists of Otago and te tangata o Rakirua, in the sustainability te Titi. I will say more, however, about hope as haunting. Following Nina Power, I will talk about hope not as simply an affective state but as a method for the analysis of concrete situations. And I will say more about the prospects for those haunting ideas which move things on in the absence of any settled visions of what should occur next – of what Gregor McLennan calls vehicular ideas. Within this, I shall note a challenge that vehicular ideas pose, insofar as they are a central coding language of informational capitalism. As such, we will need to differentiate carefully between forms of vehicularity. A vehicularity is required that can not only seek out radical variants of specific vehicular ideas – and our focus here will be upon 'knowledge management' – but of variants that can shift vehicularity itself into something closer to the now outmoded 'ideology critique'. Our unexpected guide in that latter double-movement will be Jean-Paul Sartre. Though vehicularity of this latter kind, we might envisage a hope that haunts – a kind of haunting hope that might enable Pākehā to act collaboratively without control.

The situation which brings this project to the fore is an observation as to an increasing use of ideas around 'knowledge information' to facilitate collaborative production of knowledge between members of scientific communities and members of indigenous communities under the conditions of climate change. The use of dialogical discussion to facilitate those collaborations, as had characterised fields co-production a generation or so ago, appear less common. The situation seeks to the possibility, within this deployment of the language of knowledge management a dynamic capable of facilitating the reinstatement of hierarchical relations between communities. This is a dynamic of categorical fetishism (Kordela) wherein a given way of life assumes the fantastic form of a relationship between ideas. The homology with Marx's notion of commodity fetishism ought to be clear. In conjunction with a fetishism that then emerges with regard to the ideas themselves (of epistemological assumptions of what it means to learn across cultures under conditions of climate change, coupled with ontological

assumptions regarding the classes of object that ‘really count’ in these scenarios), a forgetting occurs about the origin of those ideas. The fact that they are always in part creations of specific ways of life is disavowed and, as a consequence, that take on the appearance of being wholly natural.

A second feature of projects of this kind is that the hope they project is of a promissory kind. The ideas speak to possible new futures and the subject-positions involved – of scientific expertise – project promise.

In response to the promissory hope involved, and the dynamics of fetishisation and disavow involved with the categorical fetishism at work in the use of technical concepts to mediate the relations of co-production, I follow here the prospect of a hope that haunts. Following the resurrection of Derrida’s hauntology by Mark Fisher and Nina Power, hope is presented as an affect that is not something to come, but something behind us, hidden in the shadows, shimmering’ (Power 2017, p. 5).

Two elements of hauntology, in particular, inform this inquiry. The first, that of temporal profusion, as captured in Derrida’s Shakespearian observation as to time being ‘out of joint’. For Derrida, the experience of time is inflected by both normative messages from the future and by uncanny intrusions from the past. Emblematic of this profusion of time is an archive of science writing on a 14 year cross-cultural collaboration between ecological scientists at Otago University and the people of Rakiura, on the preservation of the sooty shearwater, te Titi. The occasion for the project was the decimation of one of the main colonies of the bird by the sinking of an oil tanker off North America. Interventions at the breeding ground for the bird, in the South Island of New Zealand, was seen to be vital for the sustainability of the species. A complicating element in this is that te Titi comprises a traditional food source for the people of Rakiura, hence the significance of their involvement.

The size and length of the project was such that it prompted a special issue in the *Journal of the New Zealand Royal Society* on its collaborative bi-cultural form. My interest with that archive lies with the contributions not from the Māori contributors but from the members of the scientific community. Three elements of their contributions stand out, with regard to impact of temporal profusion upon the reflections. The first is that the contributions seek to map the relationship which emerged between scientific and indigenous ways of knowing. A generalised theme across those contributions is that each of the approaches are ‘equal’ (in cultural-ethical terms) but ‘different (in epistemologies). With regard to those differences, the scientific approaches tended to be indexed to the experimental method, whereby the issue of causation was indexed to the linear process of observation, testing, and prediction. This conception of causality assumed the significance for analysis of linear time. Alternatively, indigenous approaches to causality were seen to turn upon a retroactive movement of time (‘retroduction’), by which prior antecedents to the situation (the risk of species extinction) were posited as a consequence of current observations (the precise nature of the risks being faced by the species). For the scientific community, retroactive forms of causality give rise to novel hypotheses (only), whereas the former approach provides the means for the generation of evidence around posited hypotheses. In this way, a hierarchy of epistemology develops in the archive, in

which the scientific method is presented as the means by which knowledge will be secured, relative to indigenous methods which sensitise perceptions as to possible lines of inquiry.

An unexpected feature emerges in this establishment of a hierarchy amidst the state of 'equal but different': the attempts to position retroactive causality relative to linear models of casuistry finds that same retroactivity return 'out of place' in the writing. This is easy to see: each and every starting point in the reflections differs – and the justification for each of those starting points only emerge later on in the tests at which points the rationales are retroactively imputed back to the opening statements. The act of positioning retroactive casuistry in a supplementary status to that of linear causality is met by its repeated return – out of place. Time is out of joint.

Given that this retroactive movement of meaning seems intrinsic to the act of writing, a question emerges as to the conditions under which the state of temporal profusion comes to be noticed, as such. The human body, with its limited range of efficiencies, finds itself generally insufficient to pick up flows of time. To this end, a phenomenology of temporal marking appears to remain in the offing. In the case of Derrida, the occasion for remarking on this state of temporary profusion was the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the prospect, as Fukuyama had it, of history having come to an end (that is, that no futures existed now beyond those offered by parliamentary capitalism). Hauntology emerges in this context, of a hope that flows upon both the messianic calls of a justice that's always yet to come and the dislocations of an uncanniness of spectres of past callings whose revenants lack an ability materialise (if they ever did).

The context of his recognition appears now to be a generalised loss of temporality, as noted by Fredric Jameson, that context being the second element of hauntology being brought forward here. 'Fukuyama's thesis that history has climaxed with liberal capitalism may have been widely derided, but it is accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious' (Fisher *Capitalist Realism* 2009, p. 6). Within this situation, the composition of that primary marker of progressive historical movement itself shifts. The utopian works now, as Jameson notes:

not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in our non-utopian present without historicity or futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are now somehow trapped and confined. (Fredric Jameson 2004, 46).

Two responses readily suggest themselves to the matter of co-production of knowledge between communities of science and indigenous peoples under climate change, from the vantage point of the hauntological turn. One is conceptual; one is praxological. Conceptually, the field could be moved on with the application of a conceptual strategy that would appear simultaneously broad enough and substantively agnostic to support an array of projections. Possible candidates might include Deleuze's notion of 'empty time' (Deleuze xxx). A conceptual approach lies always prone to categorical fetishism, however, insofar as its deployment is also liable to a disavowal of the culturally particular ways of life from which it has issued.

The preferred approach here is one that draws upon the tradition of praxis, of a reckoning into the operation of a conceptual strategy the socio-political conditions of its existence. The praxological approach taken here for engagement by communities of dominant cultures within collaborative ventures with indigenous peoples, is the notion of vehicularity (McLennan; McLennan and Osborne). 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 can be moved on in the absence of any clear or settled views about the horizon towards which movement might be directed. It is an ideas-formation associated with informational capitalism. As such, it is not an abstract position. It has socio-political overtones. With this in mind, a key analytical task, superseding that of finding radical variants of given vehicular ideas, becomes the identification of radical variants of *vehicularity* itself. - (in association with particular vehicular ideas). Moreover, McLennan assumes a linear passage in the exposure of vehicularity to its own (potentially subversive) other. Vehicularity, as a frame of ideas work within and for informational capitalism will 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. In the place of optimistic determinism, an exercise awaits of differentiating between forms of vehicularity, relative to the prospect of finding more radical variants of vehicularity within itself. This cannot be undertaken at a level of abstraction wherein only the elements of the term appear – as if such movement can be generated transcendently from the domain of politics. Rather, such work can only be undertaken in respect to concrete vehicular ideas. The vehicular idea being worked upon 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 work of ‘knowledge management’ 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 via knowledge management *induces questions*. It describes collaborative projects *in terms of knowledge management*, typically with references to broad abstractions of the object. Indicative of this move are those references which forge acronyms of the terms in an apparent performance of the phenomenon’s already existing systemacity: KM; KTT

(knowledge translation and transfer); and so on; knowledge exchange systems. Given the range of acronyms on offer, to seemingly express the phenomenon of knowledge management, this kind of vehicularity raises a question that impresses upon the systematicity being projected, as to the standard by which the appropriateness of any given version might be determined.

The second form of vehicularity enables the inductive quality to become one of system-reinforcing. That shift occurs through the promotion of one or other semblances of the term knowledge management into a source of normative traction. Examples 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); and “social capital dimensions of networks” (Inkpen and Tsang 2018). Any one of a number of versions of the term come to play that role, giving normative direction to concrete projects. In the process of such elevated status, paradox comes to characterise the vehicularity at play. The term becomes both an object that is external to the abstract variant of knowledge management through whose simple and posited functionality collaboration becomes conceivable, and fully internal to that abstract semblance.

A significant element of this paradox is the way in which it generates a surplus to itself. The paradox isn’t thereby simply a mind-game that calls for a cognitive tussle. Something associated with affect, instead, animates the space. That animation begins to be felt as soon as a particular semblance of the KM project is elevated into a normative imperative for the field as a whole. In the process, the universalising semblance that might have once existed of KM, recedes. The universal form can thereafter only be imaged via something now quite specific: the tractive force of the promoted particular. That whole does not dissipate fully, however, as there remains a residual quantum of the pleasure through which its initial appeal had, in part, formed. Lacan’s term for that residual is ‘surplus enjoyment’: an enjoyment that continues from the state of pleasure once found in the image of KN in culturally-abstracted form. A specific characteristic of that residual enjoyment gains significance this point. That residual is forever unstable, given that its source is no longer accessible to thought (given that it is now only available via the normative injunction produced for KN from within itself – history cannot be reversed). The precarious condition of that quantum is counterbalanced to the extent to which the new trajectory of KM stands in for the semblance of KM as an abstracted ideal. The extent to which the intended programme of action is thereby fetishized, will offset the precarity of surplus enjoyment in the face of its apparently inconsequential status in programmatic terms.. The tractive force of an applied KM comes, then, not from the particular semblance of knowledge management called upon to infuse the idea with normative direction (for it is, after all, but an arbitrary and mute signifier) but, rather, from the trace of enjoyment left over from the mental state now surpassed. Traces of enjoyment haunt as a spectre without a revenant.

A key question for the evaluation of vehicularity as a kind of ideas work capable of sustaining a hope that might haunt more generally, concerns the analytic work to which

that scrap of enjoyment can be put. Our guide is Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of matter as 'inverted praxis'. Inverted praxis refers to the way in which the human subject can find the contradictions of its socio-economic situation coming back to itself as the effects in nature of its actions. 'Unanticipated consequences' is a term routinely used within sociology to express such shortfalls but, as Fredric Jameson notes, this idea misses the crux of Sartre's point (Jameson 2004b). From the context of the socio-economic conditions within which activity was initially undertaken, such effects are not 'naturally' unpredictable. They become unanticipated, however, to the extent that the forms of political consciousness are not available as would have enabled those contradictions to be reckoned into the field of activity itself.

This 'return' of agency in the effects of its activity denotes a kind of 'passivised action': the objects that bear those effects act back, but passively, without intentionality. Errors in prediction associated with given fields of knowledge, in particular, congeal as shared experiences of the material effects of those errors. Anthropomorphic climate change exemplifies this dynamic: the mass discharge of black carbon over the last 150 years, into the atmosphere-as-appropriated-commons, finds that discharge returning as mass weather events. Such events constitute, in Sartre's terms, a 'counter-finality'. More famously, Sartre gave the example of Chinese peasants who, over the centuries, as if colonialists, cleared trees from land on the 'frontiers of their territory' (p. 161) for the planting of crops. As the 'atomised masses' of feudal rule, they dispossessed 'the nomads' and appropriated Nature (p. 165). The distribution of matter came to matter within this setting, however, more immediately than those conditions through which a particular range of actions had been enabled. Matter possesses varying degrees of inertia that absorbed deforestation, generating material effects that cumulatively begin to outweigh the human goals set and sustained through traditions of agricultural practice.

At first, Sartre notes, the 'primitive alienation' involved in the traditional management of knowledge 'does not express exploitation ... but, rather, the materialisation of recurrence' (p. 163). Widespread deforestation over hundreds of years comes to result, though, in erosion from mountainous regions, raising riverbeds and precipitating 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). Rivers prone to flooding became a form of passivized action, a very particular 'counter-finality' born of the peasants' feudal position situation. Praxis in the face of scarcity begin to return, laden with the effects of ecosystems exploited, as a state of *antipraxis*, of 'a praxis without an author' (p. 166). None are immune from this. Each and every group has the capacity to 'become our own enemy in the shape of a nature that bears the imprint of our praxis' (Toscano 2018, 139).

Subjectivity, in this state of 'alienated agency' may, at that point, and without too much difficulty, read into the counterfinality of the material environment, the contradictions of its own initiating activity. Material instances of counterfinality may thereby come to haunt the subject with understanding about the contradictory and alienating socio-political conditions that had enabled it to initially act.

Bhagavatula, Garzillo & Simpson 2013

Davies, Downie, Ericksen, Neely & Tilstone 2013

Deleuze

Fisher, M (2009)

Inkpen and Tsang 2018

Jameson, F. (2004a)

Jameson, F. (2004b) 'Preface' in J-P Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Verso, London and New York.

Kordela

Krishna 2011

McLennan G. 200

McLennan G. & Osborne, T.

Power

Ross and Gerrard 2008

Sartre J-P (1960/2004) *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Verso, London and New York.

Toscano, A. (2018) 'Antiphysis/Antipraxis: Universal exhaustion and the tragedy of materiality', *Mediations* 32(1): 125-44.

() ; "connectivity" (); "collaboration between [indigenous] communities and the climate scientists" (); "a fair, collaborative and inclusive approach to climate change solutions" (); and "social capital dimensions of networks" ().