Is Consumer Culture Theory Research Or Realpolitik? a Sociology of Knowledge Analysis of a Scientific Culture
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When Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) was introduced by Arnould and Thompson (2005) it was part of a strategy to create legitimacy for interpretive research. It was argued that interpretive researchers needed to be more pragmatic in their attitude. This was a fundamental change in the scientific culture in this stream of research. This paper analyse these changes and study how CCT represent a new and pragmatic attitude. It is shown how the changes intended by CCT can imply a shift from a focus on new groundbreaking research to an awareness of realpolitik consequences. This strategic move can be seen as an example of how scientific cultures try to move from a marginal position to the mainstream. The consequences of this attempt to manage science are analyzed and solutions to problems created by these changes are developed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) was introduced by Arnould and Thompson (2005) it was part of a branding strategy to create legitimacy for interpretive research. The general direction of these branding procedures is a necessary step towards a more developed discussion of academic research as they explicitly take into account the “realpolitik complexities” of science (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 6). Unfortunately, the discussion rests upon unreflected assumptions about the relationships between theory/knowledge and the status and social reproduction of academic cultures. The goal of this paper is twofold. First, the CCT discussion is embedded in a wider theoretical and empirical frame of academic cultures. As the higher education landscape is confronted with severe challenges of globalization, underfinanced mass universities and a managerial spirit with a drive for efficiency and productivity (Henkel 1997; Becher and Trowler 2001), a thorough research stream is exactly focussing on the link between science and the real world context. Second, it is intended to make the inherent logic of thought procedures in the CCT construction explicit by a deconstructive reading (Atkins 1983; Harland 1987). It is revealed how CCT represents a different perception of knowledge compared to the way knowledge was perceived among research taking part in The Interpretive Turn (Sherry 1991). The latter was focused on groundbreaking research and less interested in the realpolitik consequences, which is opposed to the CCT focus on realpolitik in its strive for legitimacy. It is shown how there have been an ongoing discussion in the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g., Becher and Trowler 2001; Henkel 2000; Pickering 1992) about the consequences in scientific cultures when they are confronted with the requirements of the real world. This is a debate that is not reflected in CCT and there is a lot to be learned from that stream of research.

The basic insights are based on a multi layered conception of dynamic scientific cultures that emerge form the informal, scientific community as a network, incorporating direct and indirect interaction with other colleagues outside of the local academic institution. If we want to deliberately change and manage these cultures, it is not enough to focus on individual academics in their assumed loyal commitment to the community. Rather, the individual academic is an actor, embedded in a system of internal and external variables. Primarily, there are micro layers of individuals, meso layers of institutions and discipline, and macro layers of national and international relationships. Instead of presupposing a homogeneity of interest and orientations, the heterogeneity of the specific constellations of institutional, disciplinary and national cultural layers and the individual researcher’s negotiation of value tensions has to be taken into account.

The deconstructive analysis of CCT is done on the basis of Greimas’ (e.g., 1987; 1990) semiotic square. It is shown how CCT reveals the classical dichotomy between knowledge and power. It is a dialectical contradiction, which are the constituting elements for the university as an institution. The Interpretive Turn can be seen as a scientific culture where there was no interest in being pragmatic and thereby a strive for recognition from the mainstream. Instead there was a tendency to stay outside the mainstream in an isolated position with no power. Arnould and Thompson (2005; 2007) want to change that by introducing CCT. Where the former stream of research had an idealistic attitude towards doing research, CCT is instead focused on the pragmatic aspects in order to get legitimacy from the mainstream and thereby being a part of the power game in the discipline. To do this the CCT researchers must leave their idealistic and isolated position and instead participate actively in realpolitik. There are logically some inherent dangers in these different movements. The Interpretive Turn has been characterized by groundbreaking research and it can be difficult to continue this kind of research if the researchers become a part of the mainstream and the power position, which is characterized by a “suppose to know” attitude. There is no easy solution to the dilemma of whether to choose the power position or to stay isolated in the knowledge position. One answer to the dilemma is a new way of dealing with this kind of research. Instead of being in one of the camps we think there is a third position in between the two camps, which we define as reflexive research. It is the pragmatic position striving for an idealistic mentality among the researchers. It is a position with a focus on pragmatic aspects of research, but at the same time leaving room for the anarchistic nature of groundbreaking research. Reflexive research is characterized by a meta-level where the scientific culture openly can reflect upon the how-to dealing with the conflicting reality of today’s research landscape.

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