Foreword to 'objects of objectivity'

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Objectivity has fruitfully been explored in last two decades, manifested by the many studies on 'objectivity' in various scientific disciplines. Due to the variety of contexts studied, the focus on where claims of objectivity can be found varies in each case: canon, experiment, expertise, formalism, instrument, measurement, method, procedure, standard, technology, testing, etc., etc. In other words, each discipline seems to define its own 'object of objectivity'. This diversity is not merely an academic elaboration. Knowledge is becoming ever more important in economy, polity, and society. Legitimacy of various styles of governance involves expectations about the objectivity of the information on which policy decisions are made, which in turn can mean lack of bias of expertise, independence of the source of the information, rigor of the analytical methods used, and disinterestedness of the expert. Activities such as large-scale meta-analysis, evidence-based policy and the role of science as 'motor' or resource of the knowledge economy may imply very different notions of objectivity.

Besides this diversity of objects, the terms in which 'objectivity' is discussed reflect the same kind of diversity: accountability, accuracy, assessment, authority, boundaries, coalition, elasticity, engagement, expertise, governance, legitimacy, precision, regime, regulation, reliability, representation, rhetoric, robustness, situatedness, transparency, truth, validity, etc. And besides this diversity, the literature on objectivity witnessed a shift from a predominant focus on objectivity discussed in terms of the subjectivity-objectivity pole, to a broader palette of perspectives. This increasing interest in objects of objectivity parallels recent developments in philosophy of science. From a traditional emphasis on theories, current philosophers shifted their focus to 'mediators' between theories and the world: instruments, experiments and technology. Due to this shift from theories to scientific practice, studies on objectivity have moved from assessments of theories towards studies of the construction of objects and objectivity.

Objects of Objectivity

To discuss these observed processes of dispersion and refocusing in the study of objectivity, a workshop[1] was organized to invite participants to reflect on their choice of

'objects of objectivity' in relation to the practice(s) they are investigating. Except for two papers that are published elsewhere (Dehue 2004) and (Maas in press), this issue contains the papers presented and discussed at this workshop.[2]

Eleonora **Montuschi** provides a nice starting point, by a philosophical framing of the object, in our chosen phrase of 'objects of objectivity'. The epistemological and onto-logical interpretations that can be attached to this single phrase illustrate her argument about the close relation between these formulations. The coordination of the epistemo-logical and ontological commitments of disciplines, she argues, must be the starting point of any sensible analysis of disciplinary variations in types of objects in various fields. With regards to what is achieved through disciplinary claims to an object, Jaap **Bos** and Anne **Beaulieu** provide examples from psychoanalytical discourse and ethnography.

By choosing this meta-theme, we hoped to initiate a debate on objectivity across boundaries. The contributing papers more than met our hopes. Though the partici-pants arrived from three different corners, philosophy, history and science and tech-nology studies, thus emphasizing different topics and asking different kind of questions, the great majority of the papers shared an empiricist approach. The empir-ical richness of the papers facilitated the crossing of borders, not least because of the intriguing narratives they provided about neighboring fields and the exposure of the objectifying practices that hide behind seemingly mundane artifacts.

Objectification

To discuss 'objects of objectivity' it may be helpful to make a distinction between 'objectivity' and 'objectification'. Objectivity seems to be about the making of claims about how one should assess the products of research. Objectification seems to be more about the ways objects are made. Both concepts are closely related (see for example Marcel **Boumans'** discussion of measuring instruments), and going through the papers one can see that much can be learned about objectivity by giving detailed accounts of objectification strategies of the cases being studied. **Montuschi** shows, for example, that the questions posed can objectify, that is, identify, classify, or describe, the object of study, both in natural and social science. **Beaulieu** shows that even in ethnographic research, a field that tends to be noted for its self-conscious approach to making its object, it is not the case that anything will do for an object. Ethnographic interests may not be quite so eclectic as ethnographers tend to claim, and the orientation to certain kinds of objects are telling of field's methodologies and limitations. **Bos** discusses vari-ous strategies of objectification that both helped shape psychoanalytic discourse on the one hand, and simultaneously reduced its proponents to subjects of these strategies on the other. He sees the transformation of psychoanalytic language into an ideology as the outcome of this process.

Trust or threat

> I am informed that Signor Galileo transfer mankind from the center of the universe to somewhere on the outskirts. Signor Galileo is therefore an enemy of mankind and must be dealt with as such. (Brecht 1966: 72)

Objectivity is about a power play between trust and threat, about moral economy of knowledge production, and Petteri **Pietikanen** discusses the moral valence of objectivity. Using a recent controversy as case study, his paper illustrates the difficulty in formulating a critique of interpretations, while maintaining a separation between facts and moral readings. In asking 'is a statement wrong?', **Pietikainen** shows that this is both an ontological and moral question.

There are other possible power plays, however, as we ourselves make our own objects (as noted by **Pietikainen** in his concluding statement). Indeed, the contributions to the workshop were strongly empirically oriented, and we wonder whether this is not also a kind of display of power. The empiricist approach requires a certain mastery of the objects in the field of study. Many researchers involved in objectivity studies are working both in and on their fields or disciplines. It may be that showing expertise in this way makes it possible to articulate claims about objectivity, while also being protected from accusations of being an outsider, of making statements from 'outside', without really knowing what the discipline is all about. The problem, however, of being too much an insider (in the sense of shared expertise) is that in practicing the study of objectivity on a certain field, one is assessed according the same criteria as studies in the field itself. Another problem appearing in the workshop discussions was that being among the experts in the field raises questions about whether one should get involved in the debates of the field, and even have some influence on the directions in which they should evolve.

Sometimes objectification is making 'something' visible. Measurement is such a way of making visible. William **Ashworth** discusses this kind of objectification by showing that in making specific aspects visible, other aspects will remain invisible. Sometimes this happens on purpose, sometimes this is fraud—also a case that can be posed in terms of power and resistance. Objectification could also mean negotiating about what the object is. Morana **Alač** shows how research using brain scans deals in facts that are embedded in a particular kind of scientific practice. The episode of article writing-reviewing-revising she analyses shows the entwinement of data analysis and illustration of findings, of object and representation. An important target of the negotiation is to find a larger audience that responds affirmatively to the question "do you see what I see?".

Audiences may accept that the object is there if experts see it, though they may not see it themselves. Objects can be a threat, however, or experts may disagree, which raises the question of whether you can trust the experts. Ruud **Hendriks**, Roland **Bal** & Wiebe **Bijker** and Mavis **Jones** discuss the effects of diversity of sources and opinions in the workings of committees on the negotiation of the objects. **Boumans** provides an example in which the object remains hidden to the lay audience so that trust in the object depends fully on trust in the expert.

Legitimacy

Objectivity can be considered as negative, as a denial (Gieryn 1994), the reigning in of subjectivity (Daston and Galison 1992). But objectivity is also a productive practice.

When objectivity becomes crystallized so as to seem evident and even transparent, it may seem that there are vested interests which are closely tied to such practices. Yet, some of the work on objectivity in this paper (and elsewhere, Porter 1995) show that some forms of objectivity may be signs of weakness or of crises in legitimacy. Explicitness in rules and procedure may be a defensive strategy. For **Jones** and **Hendriks**, **Bal** & **Bijker**, objectivity and issues of political legitimacy for policy are entwined, and change in one form has consequences for the other. Rather than cherished expertise, these authors show how objectivity can become the label for practices of both inclusion (of a variety of experts) or of boundary-drawing, in order to maintain the possibility for political action elsewhere down the line. Steven Epstein's aphorism, 'Scientisation of politics brings about a politicization of science' (Epstein 1996), suggests a next step, which is taken in these papers, and in those by **Pietikainen** and Dehue (2004). Given that the point about this interaction is clear, there remains the need to formulate in precise ways how science is politicized, and vice versa, and to characterize the sites and the dynamics that make these interactions work and to spell out what is at stake.

Notes

References

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