

Glyphosate and the democratization of knowledge for the exercise of “collective health”

El glifosato y la democratización del conocimiento para el ejercicio de la “salud colectiva”

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I cannot hide the satisfaction it gives me to have been invited to write this editorial for *Salud Colectiva*, a journal published by Universidad Nacional de Lanús that, honoring its history, takes on the discussion of a topic of such social and political significance. My connection to Lanús dates back to its legendary Polyclinic, in particular to the Mental Health group that made substantial contributions to the field and established a practice of community health care and “health for all.”

Additionally, it is especially satisfying to continue along the lines of Andrés Carrasco, a close friend and colleague, regarding the scientific model we need in order to promote a different concept of health and science in which we are all protagonists: ordinary people, professionals, and members of a scientific-technological community that commits to sharing, democratizing and enriching knowledge through an egalitarian relationship that includes all of us as citizens.

When we talk about the democratization of knowledge, we refer to a process we believe it is imperative to promote in our current society – a society strongly marked by the phenomenon of science and technology – so as to develop the capacity for interaction, negotiation, and democratic participation among all citizens. This undoubtedly requires a reasonable understanding of certain types of factual knowledge regarding science and technology, but at the same time it requires the development of the capacity for critical and rigorous thought, for formulating pertinent questions and recognizing well-founded answers. Indeed, it is a solid step towards once again associating science with reason and against Obscurantism, with freedom and against oppression such as that found in the resigned acceptance of the incontrovertible judgment of “those who know.”

For this reason, it is relevant to refer to the aspect of scientific production responsible for what we call the democratization of scientific knowledge, which does not mean to think naïvely about the possibility of multiplying experts; it is a responsibility which should be associated with the process of investigation itself and conceived, from its origin, as one of the central ideas within a policy regarding science.

Why is this important? Given that science and scientific technology modify, transform and condition society profoundly, it should be understood that those who are involved in the production of this type of knowledge are also responsible for making it accessible. This is not a minor issue, particularly for the Argentine universities, where most of the academic research carried out in the country takes place.

In order for science – and this extends to education as well – to develop identity and social value, its relationship with the community, with the society, should be central to the formulation of scientific

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objectives and should influence the character and the topics science touches (this is not a new concept in developed countries, where rules of good scientific process are well-established: the science carried out in the USA or France, for example, undoubtedly caters to the needs and priorities of those societies.)

We have already been warned of this situation by the indicators of scientific production. Although some interpret these indicators as showing progress because we have important production in peripheral topics, the Brazilian scholar Lea Velho sees these indicators a different way. In her extensively documented work, she demonstrates that Latin America is insignificant in “big science” and at the same time has lost relevance in the fields related to our culture, our diseases and our needs, fields in which we used to arouse great interest for making major contributions in unexplored terrain. We have diminished in relevance and prestige in works describing the natural environment; our school of clinical medicine, which had gained international recognition, has weakened. Physiology and biochemistry have given way to theoretical physics and molecular biology.

The ideas previously expressed could seem a digression from our central interest, the democratization of knowledge. But we do not believe this is the case, since in our opinion these matters do not belong exclusively to the field of science. They are part of the policy field and they involve all citizens. They are related, for example, to the type of medical science we have and how we are subjected to it: whether it will be preventive or if it depends on the profits of medical laboratories. They are also related to the education transmitted in the school system, the form and content of that which is taught and the extent to which critical thinking is developed.

Therefore, it is necessary to face yet another expression of a unitary mindset which presents itself as the only legitimate way of thinking, by placing the relationship between science and society at the center of scientific policy and science-education/knowledge dissemination as one of the fundamental parts of that relationship. This responds to a social demand that we understand we must help to express, given that the scientific-technical profile of our society influences the most basic and subtle aspects of our immediate reality such as our health, the environment, the production process and our work, to name those most evident. Thus, it is imperative to assume that people are ready to have a dialogue about that reality; or, to the contrary, they will be taken hostage by it. Expressed in these terms, it is expected that the relevance of the task itself will consolidate the commitment and identity of a community that, at least in our context, has moved away from the long term objectives owing, in part, to successive defeats.

At the same time, we are aware of the fact that a proposal of this type, in order to be more than a good idea, requires institutional changes that provide a framework for a cultural renovation in our universities, beginning with a decision to prioritize that which contributes to the development of an educated and egalitarian society and combats the creation of power- and knowledge-holding castes. This change requires different evaluation and objective-setting criteria as well as the development of new areas of research, reflection and educational practice. It also requires a differential stimulus that supports and legitimates the creation of regional publications that would become new vehicles of knowledge promotion and would be measured by appropriate parameters of quality and relevance, allowing us to discard criteria previously accepted as universal. Such a loaded agenda can only be meaningful if it is widely shared.

We are convinced that in our region this extremely complex task can be performed almost exclusively by the university. At the same time, it will only be viable in the framework of a process of integration that considers the university the intellectual apex of a peripheral society, a society with difficulty finding its way in the face of so many globalizing and pro-efficiency affronts. The university therefore must go beyond professional training or problem-solving related to productive innovation; these issues, while not trivial, only make sense within a larger project, as the University Reform of 1918 in Argentina teaches us. This reform is still a legacy to the region and must continue to be reproduced and interpreted in accordance with the demands of modern society.

I do not wish to end this editorial without paying tribute to other “Mothers” [in reference to the “Madres de Plaza de Mayo”, an association of Argentine women whose children were “disappeared” during the military dictatorship between 1976-1983] from Ituzaingó, who truly exercised the “democratization of

knowledge". They drew from a historical experience that gives us pride: wearing white handkerchiefs [like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo] they denounced the effects of fumigation – effects they saw with no other tools but the wisdom that comes from pain and intuition – along with support from the town's physicians, who later garnered support in the Universidad de Córdoba. Together they fought against an outsider academy and legitimized the scientific communication carried out by Andrés Carrasco, before the specialized journal financed by Monsanto could publish it.

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