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Towards a Knowledge Society
Is Knowledge a public good? Dynamics of Knowledge production and distribution

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Does educational expansion lead to an education society?

Chances and risks of a new model of society

Sociology has currently reached a relative high level of reflection, because it sensitively notices many changes in society and puts them under analysis. Under a macro theoretical perspective is it the final purpose of sociology to describe and, at best to explain, social dynamics and structural changes. A special challenge is represented by the educational expansion and its consequences. Since 1960, education has been one of the main topics of social discourse, whereby, among other things, the distribution of education as a resource as well as its relation to other relevant sizes of social structure, like occupation and income, has been of special interest in social research. As empirical studies show education hasn't lost its importance in the course of the educational expansion. Education is still a property, which determines individual chances in life in terms of labour market, income and life expectancy.

In general the question arises, if there exists a model of society, which could have predicted the consequences of the educational expansion or if they are unexpected, surprising effects? Particularly macro sociological models of society are – at the latest after the modernisation discussion – said to be informative theories of social dynamics. However, the acknowledgment that processes and developments could happen unplanned destroyed the trust in the explicational power of those theoretical paradigms (cf. Mayntz 1985). Furthermore the question arises, if sociology is actually able to posit “future prospects” (cf. Friedrichs et al. 1998)? Subsequently, three modernisation theories will be exemplified: the theory of post-industrial society (Bell), the theory of knowledge society (Willke) and the theory of information society (Spinner). These models of society can definitely be conceived as “future prospects” (cf. Friedrichs et al. 1998). Based on the three presented models, chances and risks of an education society will be analysed. In doing so, those models of society will be focussed on, which accentuate the increased significance of knowledge and education, the occupational change caused by higher qualifications and last but not least the influence of new technologies and communication media. In 1970 Bell (1975) and Touraine (1972) already tried to explain tendencies of social development by post-industrial society theory. The discussions about chances and risks of service –, knowledge – or information – societies, that were thereby

initiated, haven't been completed until this day. Although the presented models of society are hard to be tested and validated through rigorous empirical analysis, they have doubtlessly called attention to some important developments: to the continuously growing number of highly educated people, to changes in occupational patterns, to the increasing level of technology and to the phenomena of social upgrading via education.

In the following it will be called on some empirical studies that deal with the societal change caused by the increased educational participation and a general increase of knowledge as well as with some aspects of chances and risks of the mentioned theories. Primarily there are two great parts of society that are affected by changes and they are closely linked to the development of the educational system: it is the labour market and employment respectively and the occupational structure. Thereby the educational system meets the function to produce general knowledge, learning aptitude and occupational qualifications and to promote occupational mobility and flexibility (Schmid 1998: 22).

Subsequently to this discussion and against the background of the educational expansion the following questions will be discussed: Are modern societies becoming educational societies? If they do so, which chances and risks arise from this fact for that society (e.g. institutions, markets) and for its individuals? Can all members of society participate in the education society? And what requirements does an education society have to meet concerning the educational system and educational policy?

As a result it can be mentioned, that developments and requirements of the educational expansion frequently go uniformly with the named theories of modernization. Knowledge, education and information are the key concepts of the theoretical considerations. The change which takes place leads to a new social quality where the academic elite are the driving force (cf. Bell and Willke). Highly educated people are the product of the educational expansion. Empirical evidence shows that individual chances in life, status attainment and possibilities for participation are considerably allocated through education. Knowledge and education are used for screening. So the question about knowledge society is always connected to the question of vertical social stratification (Muszynski 1999: 35ff.). Thus, the educational expansion appears as one cause of social developments – of the social structure as well as of cultural and political issues. However, there are other backgrounds – demographic development, scientific progress etc. – to include which can't be observed separately from the educational expansion. The main question about an equal access to knowledge for everyone has unanimously been identified as problematic. The knowledge society splits itself in a new form of class society: in experts and laymen, in information owners and non information owners. Generally, this could lead to a polarization between the ones that know and the ones that don't know (c.f. BMBF 1999) - a differentiation which corresponds further with differences in social stratification. Thus, not all members of society can equally participate in the education society. The question whether modern societies are becoming education societies can't be answered clearly. On the one hand, education has become of much higher importance in the course of educational expansion. On the other hand, an educational society can only be called so, if this diagnosis is based on a model of society which does not pay attention solely to the learning conditions for individuals and the society in general. One rather has to provide further indicators to answer the question of what tasks an educational system has to accomplish in order to be attested sustainability (de Haan und Poltermann: 2002: 6). The headword "education society" of this article should point to the enormous significance of education. The accentuation of education at the lower end of the social stratification scale is the most honest strategy to reduce social inequality because it tries to support those who occupy, because of their lack of resources, the weakest position in the market (Müller et al. 1997: 236). Herein lays one of the chances of education society, which hasn't been sufficiently realised so far.