PROPOSING, FOUNDING AND INCORPORATING KNOWLEDGE ALLIANCES

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In February 2011, against the backdrop of increasing health inequities and many years of unsuccessful attempts at a reversal, the Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (the "Malmö Commission") began its work. Its main source of inspiration was the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, led by Michael Marmot, that had published its final report, "Closing the Gap in a Generation", in 2008. The Malmö Commission was instructed to proceed "with the aim of drafting a plan including objectives and strategies for how the City of Malmö should reduce health inequality**."**[i] When the final report was presented two years later, 31 background reports had been produced and around 2000 persons had been involved.

The Commission's final report consists of two overarching recommendations, 24 objectives and 72 actions (Stigendal & Östergren, 2013). In the first overarching recommendation, it is proposed that the City of Malmö establishes a social investment policy that can reduce inequities in living conditions and make societal systems more equitable. In the second overarching recommendation, the Commission proposes changes to the processes embedded in these systems through the creation of *knowledge alliances*, meaning collaborations on equal terms between researchers and stakeholders from, for example, public, voluntary and private sectors as well as from the community at large. It is with the concept of knowledge alliances that this paper will primarily deal.

The paper serves three purposes: firstly, to propose and explain the concept of knowledge alliances, and, secondly, to found it in the theory of cultural political economy, and the philosophy of critical realism. A reason for this endeavour is that an idea like that of knowledge alliances could get trapped and confined in an approach which we might call the "relevance approach", which contrasts *relevance* (of research) with academic *excellence* and gives priority to relevance. As will be argued in this paper, we propose a view on the relevance/excellence distinction that doesn't contrast them but rather sees the one as an integral part of the other.

The third purpose concerns the theory of cultural political economy itself. This theory faces the opposite risk to the concept of knowledge alliances by getting trapped and confined in an "excellence approach". To avoid that, it needs to stress its relevance. A way of doing that, this paper suggests, would be to incorporate the idea of knowledge alliances. That would also enable the concept of structuration, one of the core concepts of cultural political economy, to be developed, then also applied to the theory of cultural political economy itself.

1 Excellence and relevance

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27, "[everyone] has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." However, such a share in scientific advancement and its benefits has been obstructed by barriers, one of the most significant of which is the autonomous position of science. A report from the European Commission (2009) by the MASIS (Monitoring Policy and Research Activities on Science in Society in Europe) Expert Group called *Challenging Futures of Science in Society* associates this position of science with a particular regime which emerged after World War II. In this regime, scientists were in a way protected from society and universities were being funded for fundamental research, without questions asked about relevance.

This regime has come under pressure in recent decades. According to the MASIS report, "the old division of labour between fundamental and applied or problem-oriented research has almost disappeared, and with it, the functional distinctions between universities, public labs and industrial and other private research." (European Commission, 2009: 12) As the authors describe it, science is in the process of being "re-contextualised" and thereby has started to "reach out" to society. In fact, science and society have started to reach out to one another as an increasing number of actors show an interest in science.

Such an interest in involving researchers is a characteristic of large-scale EU programmes like URBACT (Stigendal, 2006) and the evaluation approach launched for the programming period of the structural funds 2007-13 (Brulin, 2010). Practitioners have, for example, been involved in the project Social Polis (Cassinari et al., 2011: 2), the "largest international transdisciplinary social platform which has dealt with the complex problématique of social cohesion, involving over 300 stakeholders with different backgrounds," supported by the European Commission. In the FP7 project CITISPYCE, researchers and stakeholders from ten European cities work together to study the inequalities affecting young people in these cities, in particular the causes of such inequalities, and identify socially innovative ways of overcoming them (http://www.aston.ac.uk/lss/research/research-centres/interland/citispyce/).

Parallel to this trend of dismantling scientific barriers, involving stakeholders and making science more relevant to society, there is an opposing trend which reaffirms the autonomy of science under the traditional notion of "excellence". This revival of "excellence" has been strengthened by the continuing emphasis on publication indicators (and international journal publications) in evaluations. The MASIS report (European Commission, 2009: 16) criticises this notion of excellence, which runs the risk of endangering the pursuit of relevance and favours

"decontextualized and globalised science while context-related and more local research, dedicated to specific problem solving, is disadvantaged. Sciences could lose their link to practice resulting from the pressure to publish in international journals instead of engaging in local environments and problem solving."

However, relevance should not be seen as contradictory to excellence, the MASIS report states. It underlines their compatibility and urges for a research "able to combine problem-solving capacities at a context-bound level and at a more general theoretical level." (European Commission, 2009: 17) This is of course not an easy task as the involvement of stakeholders in science challenges the role of science in society and the traditional academic freedom of researchers. Thus, a change of "research cultures" is required, also underlined by the MASIS report.

In consonance with the MASIS report, and in contrast with the view of excellence found in the "excellence approach", we define excellence in line with Encyclopaedia Britannica as something superior, eminently good and of the highest quality. Using that definition and supported by the theory of cultural political economy, we see relevance as one of three quality criteria of excellence. In order to become excellent, thus, scientific knowledge needs to be relevant. That requires a change of research culture, which the MASIS report rightly calls for, but also another view on knowledge. We will now draw upon critical realism and cultural political economy to present and elaborate such a view.

2 Knowledge – both a referent and a reference

Knowledge intrudes on us, just as reality in general does, and provides us with an object to refer to; i.e. something which someone claims to be knowledge. According to critical realism, such referents belong to the *empirical*, which is the case with for example this paper when the reader experiences it by reading it. The words as they are put together in sentences

and framed by sections express a content, hopefully existing, and that belongs to the *actual*. The *real* comprises all that, but also the potential, again hopefully existing, which made me decide to write this article.

Critical realists are well aware of this distinction between the real, the actual and the empirical. It is what we have to assume about the world for knowledge to be possible (Bhaskar, 1989; Sayer, 1992; Danermark et al., 2001; Jessop, 2005). These and other assumptions belong to the critical realist ontology. Added to this, the theory of cultural political economy characterises the experience of the empirical as more or less complex, which engenders a need of reducing the complexity (Sum & Jessop, 2013). This is done in basically two ways, by *structuration* and *semiosis*, the latter in the form of for example knowledge. Thus, knowledge may be regarded both in its mode of intruding on us, i.e. as something we respond to, or in the mode of our response to what has intruded on us.

In its epistemology, critical realism makes the same distinction, although it is usually referred to as the intransitive and the transitive (Fairclough et al., 2002; Jessop, 2005). This coincides with the distinction made above between what we respond to and our semiotic response in reducing complexity. As the Swedish senior scholar Sven-Eric Liedman puts it, “we understand the world that exists without us – and that we ourselves are a natural product of – but with the help of another world that we ourselves have constructed. It is only in theory that the two worlds can be separated.” (2006: 560, *our translation*) It can also be described as a distinction between referents (the intransitive) and references (the transitive). It becomes clear that knowledge can be both; i.e. objects that we refer to (referent objects) and objects that we use (reference objects) to make sense of something.

As something which may intrude on us and, thus, become a referent, knowledge consists of, for example, the arguments presented in this paper. As we work them out, we try to make them convincing. Whether they actually convince depends of course on how we succeed, but also on other

circumstances in the actualisation of the arguments, such as the predisposition of the reader and in what situation the text is read. However, even if the arguments should influence a reader, they may not be perceived as convincing, or, the other way around, a reader may feel convinced although they have not really understood what we mean. The point is that knowledge contains potential and may cause effects, already by intruding on us and causing our attention.

What becomes the effect of this knowledge potential can, however, not be taken for granted. It depends on the reader/listener as well. The effects of it are determined inter-subjectively as the actualisation of knowledge involves the listener/reception as much as the speaker/production. An idea or explanation has to be heard about or read. A message needs to be received (Fairclough, 2003).

As critical realists, we need to assume that the real consists of other potentials as well, which may then also become referents for attention, causing further needs of complexity reduction. However, many potentials do not cause our attention and even if they do, we need to understand that our references to them differ from these referents themselves; i.e. what the references refer to. Such potentials may be the ones that make us more liable to one idea rather than another (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 156). They can be caused by the other one of the two basic modes of complexity reduction, structuration. Thus, scientific knowledge is not an entirely semiotic matter, but also an effect of how the production of it is organised, where, with whom, in what context and so forth.

3 Different forms of knowledge

In order to exist in the world and get on with our everyday lives, we have to assume that knowledge exists. Thus, the belief in knowledge is not a matter of choice or preference. It should rather be seen as a passive, but necessary, acceptance. Sometimes, however, knowledge intrudes on and we have to

deal with it actively: accepting or rejecting it; processing it; making it our own. Knowledge may appear as a referent object, not only when it intrudes on us but also when it doesn't. As we may learn from the theory of semiosis, we try to make sense of it, also by using a particular context of meaning. Such contexts may comprise not only written and spoken words, but also other reference objects included in a certain style and even body language.

Accordingly, that applies to scientific knowledge as well, focused as it is on producing reasons. Fairclough et al. (2002: 3) urge us to think of reasons as emergent elements in more extensive networks of concepts, beliefs and symbols, as "we may be influenced more by the tone (e.g. warmth, hostility) or imagery of a speech than by any reasons for action that it might present." Thus, the production as well as the reception of for example an explanation presupposes various other bodily and practical forms of non-linguistic knowledge or know-how, skills and sense. Indeed, it presupposes a whole range of non-semiotic circumstances, each of which plays a role in co-determining the effect.

This wide range of circumstances means that not only spoken and written language may serve as carriers of knowledge. Knowledge may take shape in a face that knows how to address children in a school, a foot that knows how to play football, or a hand that knows how to build a house. We may call it skilled knowledge, which happens to constitute one of the three forms of knowledge identified by Aristotle, called techne. The other forms he called episteme and phronesis. Such a distinction echoes in the Swedish national *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Leisure-Time Centre 2011*:

> Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and accumulated experience – all of which presuppose and interact with each other. The work of the school must therefore focus on providing scope for expressing these different forms of knowledge, as well as creating a

> learning process where these forms are balanced to form a meaningful whole. (Skolverket, 2011: 12)

In Swedish, the name of each one of these four forms starts with an f and therefore they are called the four f's (fakta, förståelse, färdighet, förtrogenhet). Factual knowledge and understanding may be regarded as included in what Aristotle called episteme. Skilled knowledge coincides with techne while "familiarity and accumulated experience" is the form of knowledge which Aristotle called phronesis, often also referred to as tacit knowledge. To simplify, we may therefore refer to *empirical*, *theoretical*, *skilled* and *tacit* knowledge.

As we see it, nobody possesses only one of these forms of knowledge. Most assuredly, all of us possess all of them, although in different combinations. Such differences can also be associated with different professions. For example, the knowledge of a childcare worker at a day-care centre is probably skilled for the most part but also empirical, theoretical and tacit. They know a lot about the children (empirical knowledge) and why they behave as they do (theoretical knowledge – understanding). They can also make assessments of them and their needs (tacit knowledge).

A researcher possesses another combination, perhaps dominated by theoretical or empirical knowledge. However, scientific knowledge consists of skilled knowledge as well because science is a practice and thus the researcher needs to be practical. Most obviously, the skilled knowledge of a researcher includes reading, writing, using a computer etc. But a researcher also needs to be able to synthesize knowledge, grasp problems, problematize, evaluate arguments and research findings, etc., i.e., use abilities and access thought processes which are – at least initially – more or less intuitive (tacit).

4 Producing knowledge, collective as well as personal

Neither experience nor information is the same as knowledge although either one of them may become an important starting-point for the production of knowledge. In order to become knowledge, experience and information have to be worked upon. Whatever the particular form of the four mentioned above, knowledge has to be produced. Otherwise it does not exist. We have to assume, indeed believe in, the existence of knowledge. But to *know* is something we cannot do until we have made the knowledge our own.

If knowledge is to become our own, work is required. We must *make* it our own. At the onset, it is not our own but it could possibly become so depending on the work we put into it, the context and the support. If we succeed, that makes knowledge a reference for us. We then understand what it is about. This is how we understand what learning means, i.e. as the individual or collective reproduction of an already existing knowledge, whatever the combination of forms (empirical, theoretical, skilled and tacit). Knowledge in this reference mode can be called personal.

Correspondingly, the existing knowledge that we learn from can be called collective knowledge. It stems from a production that many have contributed to. Then, as knowledge it becomes a referent object, which requires people to believe in it. And that in turn requires that a sufficient number of people have already made it their own personal knowledge, assessed it and somehow accepted it as collective knowledge. If many are to believe, it must be approved by persons with authority, for example by representatives of the scientific community or by practitioners with relevant experience. But then, such authorities might also contribute to the development of this collective knowledge. Collective knowledge can only be developed by people who have made it their own personal knowledge, which means that they know what it is about. Only the results of personal knowledge processes can contribute to the development of collective knowledge. We have to learn – in

the sense of reproducing collective knowledge – before we can try to develop it.

The distinction between collective and personal knowledge can be clarified by localising the former between us. This is where Sum & Jessop (2013: 152) localise semiosis generally, to a space between expression and understanding. We agree but want to add that it isn't possible to get access to this space simply by just linking up to it. If we believed that, it would correspond to a view which regards learning as a passive replenishment, just like a car getting fuelled. In contrast, learning means to treat knowledge as a referent which we need to make sense of by creating our own reference to it. Just like for other references, the relation to its referent is insurmountable. Learning means that we create a knowledge which is always something different than the knowledge that we learn from. That justifies the naming of the knowledge that we learn from as collective and the knowledge that we have learnt as personal. Yet, our personal knowledge can of course be assessed, but not in terms of being close or distant to collective knowledge.

As individuals, we may certainly learn a lot and contribute to the development of collective knowledge but so much more collective knowledge exists than the knowledge attributable to individuals. It fills entire libraries, and is materialised in books, websites, paintings, films, music, manuals, codes, formulas etc. It is produced and possessed by craftsmen and –women and learnt by their apprentices. Most of the collective knowledge stems from the work of many people, in principle all mankind. It is something that we acquire from previous generations and have a common responsibility to safeguard and further develop. Collective knowledge is a kind of commons, our collective property.

But if we are to believe in this collective knowledge, it must be confirmed by an authority. The state provides such an authority and thus guarantees the existence and the quality of the commons. Our dependence on these authorities makes critical thinking especially important. It requires free and

critical-thinking people to contribute to the development of collective knowledge, that is, to contribute to our commons. Here we have the more profound implication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27. To share in scientific advancement is not only a matter of rights but also imperative for scientific knowledge to develop.

5 Three quality criteria of excellence

Reality intrudes on us, for example when somebody claims that he/she represents knowledge. As researchers we should be obliged to respond by questioning such a claim. On what conditions can it be seen as knowledge? We have in the three previous sections paved the way for an answer to that question. Firstly, the quality of knowledge should be assessed with regard to what it says about its referent object; the sense it makes of it. Secondly, the assessment should be made with regard to its consistency as a reference object (i.e., how well it manages to place its objects of study in a theoretically consistent whole). Thirdly, seeing knowledge as production where different kinds of knowledge is used to produce new knowledge implies it to be assessed with regard to its usefulness. Another word for that is relevance. In short, we may call the three of them the referent, the reference and the relevance criteria of excellence.

A similar distinction, although on a partly different ground, has been suggested by Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg (1994: 36). They distinguish between three forms of scientific validity; the first one associated with empiricism, the second with rationalism and the third with pragmatism. Instead of prioritizing one of them to the exclusion of the others, the authors suggest that science needs all three forms of validity. The three constitute "integral parts of the research process and attempts to completely remove any of them are unfavourable for the process." (1994: 38, *our translation*) Stigendal has used this distinction in previous work and referred to the three as empirical, theoretical and practical validity (2002). As we argue here, they coincide with the referent, reference and relevance criteria.

An important point here, however, is also that this distinction sheds new light on the distinction between relevance and excellence. To become *excellent*, research needs to fulfil all of these criteria. Accordingly, relevance is not a feature isolated from that of excellence but an integral part of what may make research excellent.

It could, perhaps, be considered self-evident that research needs to be relevant *in* (and for) research. Other researchers must be able to deal with our results, reasons and arguments. This *intrinsic* relevance criterion means that if nobody in the research field can make sense or use of our results, they have no relevance.

On the basis of the previous sections, however, we would want to expand the argument and claim that there also needs to be *extrinsic* relevance for the relevance criterion to be met. This may be done by involving practitioners in the research. Building on the view of knowledge as one but not the only potential referent influencing the process of research, involving practitioners may bring about favourable forms of organisation and constructive environments. Regarding the view of knowledge as a reference, practitioners may contribute with elements to incorporate as moments in the development of knowledge. Regarding the view of knowledge as being produced, involving practitioners may stimulate creativity.

In the following sections we will argue these points and link them to our understanding of the concept of knowledge alliances. In fact, we see knowledge alliances as a way to accomplish relevance for research by creating a form where the research can both be outwardly communicated *and* receive invaluable input through other forms and sources of knowledge than the strictly scientific ones. Knowledge alliances create *interesting* research and build interest *in* research. All this points to the relevance criterion of research, in both its intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. And since relevance forms an integral part of what makes research excellent, it also points to how excellence can be accomplished.

6 The problematic researcher-practitioner relationship

In a previous section we presented the distinction between the empirical, the actual and the real, characteristic of critical realist ontology. This distinction concerns referents in general. Switching to the reference mode, the distinction between signifier and signified also becomes crucial. We understand the former (signifier) as corresponding to the empirical while the latter corresponds to the actual (signified). When we consider knowledge as a reference, it comprises both signifiers and signifieds, i.e. both empirical expressions and an actual content. Furthermore, as a reference knowledge refers to something, and that is the referent. As Fairclough et al. (2002: 5) claim, "there are not only signifiers (e.g. words) and signifieds (concepts) but also referents."

The distinction between signifier, signified and referent is useful if we are to understand how knowledge production in general may have different starting points. A production of knowledge may start with each one of the three. For example, it may start with experiences or impressions of reality: something that we want to make sense of and thus point out as a referent. Or it may start with words read in a book and with a need to understand what they mean. Also, it may start with an understanding to which we have not yet put the appropriate words. Regardless of the starting point, concepts have to be produced. That means relating words to referents by defining them. The starting point matters, however, as it may determine the privileging of a particular knowledge over others for interpreting events, legitimising actions and representing social phenomena (Fairclough et al., 2002: 5).

The argument about different starting points helps us understand one of the most common problems that occurs when researchers and stakeholders work together. What happens when researchers invite stakeholders; when, for example, stakeholders from different countries are invited to work together

with the researchers in an EU project on the theme of social cohesion (Stigendal, 2010)? That depends on how familiar each partner is with the term (signifier) and what they know about it (signified). Is the term used as a reference? Is there an issue called social cohesion? Yes, there is in the EU but not really in for example Sweden. In Sweden, the term may be used from time to time – and it can of course be translated to Swedish – but there is no general understanding of what it means. And it certainly isn't a big issue on the political agenda, at least not yet, in contrast to the EU where a whole policy area exists called cohesion policy.

The point then is that practitioners in Sweden do not really know what the researchers are talking about. Practitioners have been invited to a discussion with researchers, but the researchers have already determined both the signifier and the signified, i.e. the issue in terms of its empirical form (the term) and its actual content (the concept). That would not necessarily be a problem if the practitioners were familiar with at least the signifier (the term) and perhaps also had their own understanding of it (the concept). But if they are not and if they do not? What does the issue called social cohesion include?, a practitioner would ask. Is the work that I do as a practitioner included? Do my experiences count? What problems and experiences am I allowed to discuss? The lack of familiarity with the issue, the name of it as well as what it means, create uncertainty among the practitioners. How should they know what the issue includes? They would regard social cohesion an academic issue, as it does not stem from everyday life or even the public debate, and feel alien to it.

Yet, practitioners may have a lot of experience of the lack of social cohesion, indeed knowledge as well. They may have knowledge on exactly the same referents that the researchers refer to by calling it social cohesion, but the practitioners may perhaps call it something else. Moreover, they may not have had the time or opportunity to go into a great deal of theorizing around the words they put on their experiences. The practitioners would, perhaps,

prefer to express their experiences in images or story-telling (e.g. Berglund and Wigren-Kristoferson, 2012), which, in that case, could be a challenge for the researchers (with their preference for more formal and abstract modes of expression) but could also provide an opportunity for them to develop their own use of imagery and metaphor in argumentation.

In any case, our point so far is that an involvement of practitioners on biased conditions does not actualize their full potential. The privileging of knowledge by forcing it to be expressed in a certain way impedes them from making the knowledge produced by the researchers their own knowledge. Furthermore, it impedes the researchers too, making it more difficult for them to take advantage of the experience and knowledge of the practitioners.

7 Why involve practitioners?

Included in that potential is a lot of experience that should be regarded as vital forms of the empirical, in principle just as valid as for example statistics. Thus, researchers working together with practitioners may get access to a wealth of experience, there to be processed into knowledge. Indeed, practitioners usually possess a lot of knowledge as well, for example in the form called tacit knowledge. For it to be shared, it first of all has to be made explicit, which could be done if practitioners and researchers had a chance to work together. Favourable social contexts and arenas need to be set up where researchers and practitioners are allowed to take part and be respected also on other grounds than their professional merits, for example owing to their considerateness, sense of humour, values etc. The challenge is to continue the re-contextualisation of science by involving practitioners on an equal footing, enabling them to take part based on conditions favourable also to them and not only to the researchers.

The production of scientific knowledge requires a lot of creativity, which may be stimulated by other kinds of reference objects such as pictures and narratives. Another aspect of creativity is spurred by questions from the

outside. Indeed, as researchers we may benefit from being questioned by others and forced to explain ourselves using other means of expression than the typical ones in the scientific community. Such questions can make us aware of semiotic moments unconsciously incorporated in our scientific discourse. Just as Fairclough et al. (2002: 3) urge us to think, reasons should be regarded as emergent elements in more extensive networks of concepts, beliefs and symbols. Therefore, even researchers are influenced by other semiotic moments than reasons, such as the style or imagery of writing. Perhaps we stick to a theory mainly because we fancy its originator. Perhaps we stick to an argument because it has become incorporated in our habitus, our semi-conscious dispositions of which Bourdieu has made us aware and which Fairclough et al. (2002: 4) have also called to our attention.

Practitioners can help researchers reveal the unconsciously incorporated semiotic moments by asking other kinds of questions. Researchers who are inclined to over-emphasise theoretical knowledge may be counterbalanced by practitioners who instead stress relevance. As an example, we can reconnect to the practitioners in the previous section working in urban areas associated with a lack of social cohesion. Their theoretical brooding over the problems is probably very limited, and not something the get paid for. So, something needs to happen. A practitioner would ask “What can I bring back home to my work in the community?” Restless kids need to be taken care of. Schools have to be kept open despite vandalism, fires, shattered windows and burglary. Many of these practitioners probably ask themselves: Are we doing the right thing? For some, the answer is clear. They know that they are not doing the right thing, but given the circumstances they cannot do anything else. Co-operating with such practitioners on an equal footing can put a fruitful pressure on the researchers and provide them with valuable sources of inspiration.

Another advantage of researchers and practitioners working together is that it enables both, not only the researchers, to make the knowledge that is

produced their own. As we have stated in this article, knowledge may exist regardless of what we think about it, but in order to be able to use it, we need to make it a reference object. We need to make clear for ourselves and others what the knowledge is about. And that requires work and takes time. Also, whether or not we succeed depends on the social context. Practitioners working together with researchers may get that opportunity which makes them much more eager as well as capable of using the knowledge.

8 Knowledge alliances

The term knowledge alliances is part of Europe 2020, the strategy adopted by the EU in 2010. Europe 2020 has set three priorities, all of which concern growth. Growth should be smart, sustainable and inclusive. These three priorities form the basis of five goals and seven so-called flagship initiatives. One of the seven flagship initiatives, called “Innovative Union”, includes support for knowledge alliances. The definition, however, tends to be limited to alliances between “education and business”. This interpretation is too narrow, in our opinion, and we propose that knowledge alliances should include many more stakeholders, i.e. practitioners in general, public sector workers, citizens, policy makers, young people, politicians and volunteers, to mention those who come most readily to mind (see also Novy et al., 2013).

The influential report *Cities of Tomorrow. Challenges, Visions, Ways Forward* (Hermant-de-Callataÿ and Svanfeldt, 2011) also supports the establishment of knowledge alliances in a broader sense than the flagship initiative expresses. The report builds on a process initiated by Johannes Hahn, Commissioner of the European Commission responsible for regional policy. More than fifty experts from various European countries, researchers and experienced practitioners, participated in the process and contributed. The report highlights the “neighbourhood-adapted forms of education and knowledge sharing” (2011: 56) as part of a strategy for social cohesion that

"requires a revised and more inclusive vision of the knowledge society and the encouragement of knowledge alliances." (2011: 53)

> As we move away from a closed practice between experts and decision-makers, we see more open and participative approaches, involving, in most cases, key stakeholders in various thematic or transversal workshops and sometimes a wider citizen involvement. (2011: 79)

The Malmö Commission suggests a similar approach, defining knowledge alliances as "equal partnerships between researchers and stakeholders such as administrations, associations, trade and industry, focused on combining excellence and relevance" (Stigendal and Östergren, 2013: 131). The Malmö Commission finds it particularly urgent for such knowledge alliances to focus on the connection between economic growth and health. Knowledge alliances can be created in many different contexts and the Malmö Commission highlights some different forms of such alliances, on the basis of previous experiences in Malmö.

The first one concerns the large-scale surveys on living conditions where council workers were engaged to do interviews. Between 1995 and 1997, around 100 council workers participated, carrying out a total of 3 700 interviews with residents in Malmö, mainly in their own homes (Stigendal, 1999). A similar study was made in 2006 when 18 council workers from one of the 10 city districts carried out 546 interviews with residents in that district (Stigendal, 2007). Similar studies have also been carried out with young adults engaged to interview other young adults and/or children (Stigendal, 2000; 2011). All these stakeholders' experience-based knowledge on the population and housing areas as well as on interculturality and how to interact with the residents has been enormously beneficial for the research. However, it requires a special knowledge to conduct interviews in a project with research ambitions. Therefore, these projects have also included tailor-made and problem-based courses, building on and

supplementing the participants' own knowledge. The common arena established has also made it possible for stakeholders to learn from each other and process their experiences into knowledge.

Another type of knowledge alliance is the peer review. The method has long been used by academics, but the EU Commission made it a part of the Lisbon process and its "open method of coordination", while thereby expanding its field of application. At first it was used only in national comparisons, but the scope has been gradually expanded. Supported by Eurocities (2009), peer review has also received a larger spread. The method involves colleagues working on similar issues who meet and evaluate each other's efforts. In this way, they learn not only from others but can also better understand what they themselves are doing. As a researcher, Stigendal has been involved in several such peer reviews, both locally and internationally, and benefited greatly from the experience-based knowledge possessed by stakeholders as he has sought to develop the understanding of urban realities which *Cities of Tomorrow* asks for and which "requires the development of more appropriate and multifaceted indicators capable of measuring more qualitative aspects of urban economic and social life – the environment, economic development potential, cultural assets, etc." (Hermant-de-Callataÿ and Svanfeldt, 2011: 61)

A further type of knowledge alliance is the one associated with the concept of on-going evaluations introduced by the EU Commission for the programming period of the structural funds 2007-13. It implies a shift from a concept of mid-term evaluation driven by regulatory imperatives towards a more flexible, demand-driven approach to evaluation. According to the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket, 2010), the responsible authority in Sweden for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), on-going evaluation should firstly provide process support, secondly document the experience and knowledge to create learning and bring the knowledge back to the stakeholders, thirdly evaluate how well a

project achieves its goal to enable strategic change, and fourthly put the results into a broader societal perspective. In his work as an on-going evaluator, Stigendal has stressed the need of working together with the stakeholders to develop knowledge on the problems and to find ways that the project can contribute to solving them and to assessing the solutions.

All these projects have aimed at excellence but with relevance as an integral part of the research process. Such a combination is advocated by Svensson et al. (2007) as well in an article on interactive research. They mention equal participation and shared learning as characteristics of interactive research. Moreover, the knowledge produced should "be of practical relevance and of a high scientific standard." (Svensson et al., 2007: 236) By interactive research, Svensson and co-authors mean a development of action research. The ambition to establish equal and mutually advantageous relations between researchers and stakeholders is common to action research and interactive research, but "in action research these relations are based primarily on the researchers contributing to practical development and to a lesser degree on the participants contributing to the theoretical work." (2007: 239)

In their article, Svensson and co-authors present an illustration which clarifies the differences between the actors. A major difference concerns the question of interest, as "the researcher is interested in producing new theories that can be published in books, articles and papers. The participants gain a deeper insight that can be used in organising a change process that will be more sustainable because of the critical analysis resulting from the joint learning process." (2007: 247) Svensson and co-authors mean that the interest of the practitioners lies in being the drivers of change. Thus, the process includes two purposes, described in the illustration as "academic results" and "usefulness". The article puts a lot of emphasis on the equitable and mutual relationships, yet, at the same time, it refers to the whole endeavour as "research". In our view, that creates a tension between signifier

and signified. They mean something but signify something else by referring to everything as research and thus giving priority to the one party. For that reason, we would rather use knowledge alliance as an overarching term.

9 Concluding remarks

In this paper, we set out to accomplish three things: firstly, to introduce and explain the concept of knowledge alliances; secondly, to anchor this concept in the theoretical framework of cultural political economy; and thirdly, through this discussion to throw light on the important issue of how to achieve relevance in research, and in so doing also contribute to a development of the theory of cultural political economy and its potential impact on societal change.

The paper takes its point of departure in the division between two different approaches, the one associated with excellence and the other with relevance. In contrast to this assumed division, we have argued that relevance should be seen as an integral part of excellence and founded such an amalgamation in critical realism and cultural political economy. We have drawn upon the distinction in critical realism between intransitive and transitive but renamed it as a distinction between referents and references. By referents we mean the objects which we refer to, perhaps because they have intruded on us and imposed a complexity which we need to reduce in order to go on. Such a referent may be knowledge, which we refer to in order to learn or develop it. Other potential referents, influencing the process of knowledge production, include how the production of such processes is organised, where, with whom and in what context.

By references we mean the objects we use in referring to referents. Such a reference is knowledge, which thus appears in two modes, both as a referent and a reference object. We suggest two quality criteria of excellence as corresponding to each one of these two modes and we have named them hereafter. The referent criterion assesses knowledge with regard to what it

says about its referent object, while as a reference object knowledge can be assessed with regard to its consistency. To this, we would like to add relevance as a third quality criterion of excellence. Relevance should, thus, be understood as a quality criterion which assesses knowledge with regard to its usefulness (or use-value). Accordingly, excellence should be assessed with regard to the three r:s; the referent, the reference and the relevance criterion.

These three criteria can also be linked to three forms of knowledge; empirical, theoretical and practical, while the last one comprises both skilled (techne) and tacit knowledge (phronesis). Nobody possesses only one of these forms of knowledge, but different combinations of them, we suggest. Such a view opens up for involving practitioners, representing other combinations than the ones possessed by researchers, to take part in research processes, as in the formation of knowledge alliances. By knowledge alliance we mean partnerships built on equity and mutuality where researchers work together with actors of different kinds with a stake in the development of knowledge about society. The term knowledge alliance has the advantage of stressing the mutuality needed. Scientific knowledge is important, but so is the experience-based knowledge of practitioners.

The stakeholders may contribute by providing experience that can be processed into knowledge together with the researchers and by providing tacit knowledge that can be made explicit. The stakeholders may stimulate creativity by introducing other forms of expression, like images and storytelling, and asking other kinds of questions. The stakeholders may help the researchers revealing unconsciously incorporated semiotic moments and reminding them about other potential referents, although in other words. Inclinations of researchers to over-emphasise theoretical knowledge may be counterbalanced by the stress on relevance from the standpoint of the practitioners. Working together in a knowledge alliance may enable both parties, not only the researchers, to make the knowledge produced their own.

In a knowledge alliance a production of both scientific and practical knowledge is taking place, the former mainly to the benefit of the researchers and the latter mainly to the benefit of the stakeholders.

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