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Producing Dangerous Knowledge: 
researching knowledge production in Belgium

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ABSTRACT This is an article about the struggle for control of knowledge in a divided society. It starts off by describing Belgium as a consociational democracy - that is, a society organized around integrated pillars of society (Catholic, secular), each of which provides a wide range of services (educational, training, health, health insurance, social care, family planning, leisure) to 'its' people. This special politico-institutional arrangement inherited from the past, though it has evolved, still has profound implications for the way knowledge circulates (or not) and for the way it is used (or not) and perceived both within pillars and across the policy realm: the co-existence of distinct communities requires a form of discretion. The article then goes on to describe the specific incidents that occurred in the course of a recent research project: the authors' written reports produced unexpected effects. They try to make sense of these events by reflecting on how the specific Belgian context can affect and be affected by the production of knowledge about itself. Finally, they extend their reflection to other contexts by emphasizing the general process behind their observation: the transformative effect of knowledge. Knowledge needs to be understood as an act (of construction) that can affect its very object of analysis.

The Belgian Context, its Elites and the Rules of their Game

The article is an attempt to reflect on a couple of critical incidents that occurred in the course of the KnowandPol research project in Belgium. The incidents took place when the people (academics, researchers, top civil servants, inspectors, policy-makers, school principals) we had interviewed and their colleagues and hierarchy were informed about the results of our research, which included an analysis of their situation. In order to understand the events we wish to reflect upon, it is necessary to present the context of education research in Belgium, the nature of the consociative democracy and pillarization, as these structure the specifics of the research-policy relationship in Belgium.

Belgium has often been described as a consociational democracy stemming from a sharply segmented society (Lijphart, 1979). It is both a federation and a consociation. Its linguistic divisions account for the fact that it is a federation. Its denominational divisions (which have existed for a much longer time) account for the fact that it is a consociation. Our focus here is on the consociational arrangements within French-speaking Belgium alone. Consociational democracies usually arise in societies where several integrated but sociologically distinct communities live side by side on the same territory (Lijphart, 1977; Boogards, 1998; Papadopoulos, 2003). These communities can be based on race, language or philosophical inclination. In Belgium, they are based on philosophical preferences: they constitute denominational segments of society (pillars).

Historically, two separate communities (Catholic and non-Catholic) upheld different values, and viewed the world and their place in it differently. They agreed to live together solely on the
basis of a ‘pact’, according to which each community would be given equal rights to organize its own collective life (Mabille, 2000). This allowed each community to create a wide range of organizations dealing with almost every aspect of daily life (i.e. a pillar). Today, each ‘pillar’ has a broad network of functional organizations providing a wide range of services. Each has educational services (pre-schools, primary and secondary schools), training services, institutions of higher education, health care services, health insurance, hospitals, trade unions, youth organizations and political parties. It is said of pillars that they care for their people ‘from the cradle to the grave’. One should note that while Catholics actually developed their own ‘network’ of schools, non-Catholics did not do so: rather, non-Catholics overwhelmingly attended schools run by various public bodies (whether local, regional or national).

Our main point is that the consociational democracy prevailing in Belgium (Seiler, 1997) does not encourage knowledge use and circulation across the policy community. The main argument here is that discretion and secrecy constitute fundamental requirements of pillarized society. As Lijphart (1977, pp. 41-44) indicates, one of the main principles (Boogards, 1998) enabling such democracies to function peacefully is that of segmental autonomy (autonomie segmentaire). According to this principle, once an agreement is reached regarding the distribution of resources among segments (pillars), each pillar then ‘minds its own business’, so that all parties involved benefit from a relative autonomy. Segments then do not need or want to know what others do, or why or how they are doing it. Neither do they want others to look into their own affairs. The mot d’ordre is non-involvement in the affairs of the neighbour. Discretion is the price of peace in a consociational democracy. In this context, policy assessment does not expand and, more generally, knowledge about the system and its components is not wanted. This explains why, as many experts have observed (Varone & de Visscher, 2001; Varone & Jacob, 2004), evaluation policy is rather underdeveloped in Belgium.

If consociative democracies require such discretion, they also generate specific networks of close relationships between actors across different fields (education, health, research) within a given pillar. It is with the specificities in mind that we may turn to our critical incidents.

**Reporting to the Powerful**

While reflecting on the qualitative research process involved in investigating the powerful, one can distinguish between different ‘moments’ around the process of interviewing: a moment of access, a scene of interaction and a scene of exit and conclusions. The scene of access includes all actions and interactions necessary to gain access to the field (getting in touch with an actor and presenting oneself, obtaining an appointment, sometimes being delayed, or rescheduled). The scene of interaction is the interview itself, how it is set up and ordered, the tone of the participants, including signs of deference or authority, and so on. The scene of exit and conclusions is related to the type of feedback that the researchers provide their informants with: it involves communicating the analysis to those who have informed the research process. Hence it is about reporting to the powerful. Such feedback can take the form of seminars with ‘end-users’, and the form of written documents (research reports, articles that are returned to the interviewees and possibly also to a wider audience). This ‘moment’ of exit and conclusion includes the possible reactions of the interviewees when finding out and discussing the ‘results’ and the work of interpretation developed by the researchers.

Any one of these three ‘moments’ can be understood and analysed as a knowledge-related social interaction worthy of a reflexive analysis. In particular, the third moment, the exit moment, is neglected in the literature. There are some reflexive and methodological articles about interviewing the elite (Bogner et al, 2009) in a divided society (McEvoy, 2006), but few discussions about the knowledge diffusion and possible negotiations that follow the fieldwork. How are our analysis received by those they actually speak of, when the latter are powerful? What are the processes and specific difficulties that can emerge during this phase of the work? This article will explore a couple of critical incidents that took place while reporting to the powerful in Belgium. The aim of the contribution is to provide a reflexive account of the difficulties we faced while informing our interviewees about how we made sense of their situation and of them themselves.
The Critical Incidents

The two incidents occurred in the course of the KnowandPol research process in Belgium. Both are centred on the ‘exit and conclusion moment’. The KnowandPol research project investigates the relationship between knowledge and policy, and is concerned not with ‘knowledge’ on the one hand and ‘policy’ on the other, but with the political use of knowledge, or with policy as a process of reciprocal sense-making. Neither knowledge nor policy are produced in single locations and disseminated unchanged to others. Both are constantly created and transformed in the interaction between multiple sites of productive practice. Hence, in this research, we deal with how various kinds of knowledge are produced for and used in the policy sphere. We are interested in knowing how knowledge is produced in the field, by whom, from which institutional location, for what purposes, with what effects and for whom.

Interviews were therefore conducted with stakeholders (including trade unions and network representatives), academics and researchers in education, inspectors, school principals, top civil servants and policy makers. The interviews themselves took place in a good atmosphere. We faced no or little difficulty in obtaining appointments. A number of the interviewees, especially the academic ones, knew us and probably felt as if they were simply talking to colleagues. The incidents took place when they were informed about our results and the way we analysed their situation.

The first incident took place in 2008 while researching the development of PISA in Belgium. We had conducted a range of interviews with various actors involved in the construction, in the interpretation and in the utilization of the PISA results. One of our goals was to map the actors involved in the process in such a way as to understand who is working for or with whom and why. In our draft report, we argued that it was possible to understand some of the logic of the relationships among actors (academics, civil servants, experts, stakeholders) involved in PISA by retracing their position within the consociative pillars and networks of Belgian society. We were trying to show how knowledge is constructed and circulated in the field. Once our analysis was drafted, we organized a one-day seminar where all interviewees were personally invited to discuss our work. Those who attended did not contest our findings. Unfortunately, some could not attend, and hence they only found out about our work by reading the online report a few months later. Their reaction was then quite marked by irritation and resentment: our analysis was clearly not welcomed by (some of) the very actors we were talking about. Such a reaction can only mean one thing: they were somehow affected by our knowledge. As we had shown – maybe abruptly – how their work was socially constructed - that is, how it was, in practice, embedded in various networks of relationships with other actors - we have reason to believe that they may then have felt that this was likely to weaken their position and to affect, consequently, their credibility in crucial scientific/political debates related to the interpretation of the PISA results in Belgium. The problem is that once one shows the social construction of knowledge (its socio-political dimensions, its socio-historical foundations), the knowledge in question may appear ‘weaker’ in the eyes of some. In fact, some of our informants explicitly express their concern that our report would be used by those opposing them in such debates as a means for enfeebling the validity and solidity of their knowledge.

The second incident took place later during the course of the same research project. This time we had been investigating the construction of external assessments of pupils. We were interested in understanding how examinations were built, by whom, for what purpose, with what kind of effects. Our means for researching this issue were interviews and direct observations. One needs to know that the development of standardized external evaluation tools is an important and relatively new issue on the education policy agenda in French-speaking Belgium. Public authorities have therefore been developing such tools only very recently (laws on that subject were voted on in 2006 and 2009). From the start of our investigation, we were, however, aware of the fact that there were also other initiatives undertaken at different levels and aiming at the development and utilization of external evaluation tools. The main networks themselves were constructing their own set of evaluation tools for their schools. We also investigated other interesting initiatives at a much more local level: some inspectors in charge of a sub-regional geographical area were developing such tools locally.
This last kind of initiative is at the centre of the critical incident we wish to reflect on here. It was initiated by a small group of inspectors in charge of a specific area of the French-speaking community. They had gathered a group of primary school head teachers and helped them construct standardized evaluation tools. What is very specific with this local initiative is that it gathered head teachers from the different networks. It was by no means an official policy initiative. It was, rather, a local initiative undertaken by a few inspectors who argued that such an initiative could be understood as part of their new legal mandate. However, it is unclear whether they were all so positive about this; some of them insisted that they needed to be careful about any risk of overreaching their mandate, and none of them was at first in favour of producing too much publicity around their work. They were working somehow with discretion. We have reason to believe that some individuals in the public authorities were aware of their initiative long before our own investigations were made public. When we approached the group of inspectors, they were actually quite keen to give us access to their work, as they felt that their work was innovative and very productive. Interviews and direct observations were then made. Before reporting our work, we had had a discussion with them and they agreed that we would use their case in our report. Of course, the report would make all names and locations anonymous, though all knew that anyone involved in education would have no difficulties in guessing which case we had been studying.

Our first report (C. Mangez, 2010) was a written document whose ambition was strictly limited to describing the landscape of initiatives aiming at developing external evaluation: we simply listed and described the various initiatives, whether very central and official, whether local and somehow clandestine, or whether some other type of initiative. In the second report (Cattonar et al, 2010), we developed a more detailed analysis of the local initiative mentioned earlier. Using the language of description of Actor Network Theory, we emphasized that this local initiative was rather successful in its capacity to assemble and enrol a diversity of actors in its network and hence in its capacity to make a difference in the field. Before being made public, the report was submitted to the very actors we had been researching; they did not ask for any changes and basically agreed with the content of our report.

Not long after the public delivery of our first report, the inspectors who had taken on the initiative in question were asked to come to a meeting called by the central authority (the higher level of their own hierarchy). They informed us of this meeting before it took place and reported to us on what happened afterwards. There is no doubt this was a direct consequence of our report being made available to all (online). During this meeting with their hierarchy, the inspectors were told that, although the work they were doing was ‘productive and positive’, they should not pursue such initiatives in the future. The hierarchy conveyed the impression that they themselves were under some kind of external pressure to have them stop or adjust and reframe their work. To this day, we do not know where the pressures they mentioned originated from. It is, however, highly likely that the reasons for such pressures lie in the fact that this local initiative was being successful in gathering and assembling head teachers and teachers belonging to different networks.

A few months later, the same reports were used by a deputy in the Parliament as an argument for questioning the minister about the efficiency of promoting local initiatives and local responsibility.

Discussion

How can we understand the critical incidents? How can we make sense of what happened? Of course, the Belgian context is particularly sensitive to the development of knowledge about itself. Belgium is a country of conflicts and compromises between various groups and actors. It is also a country of highly complex equilibria. In the Belgian context of consociational democracy, ‘pillarization’ provides the organizational basis of separate provision of schooling (and most other social policy provision). Education policy is a permanent site of negotiation and compromise, not just among the political parties of the ruling coalition, but also among the main ‘interested parties’ of the education system, such as the networks and union organizations situated in the main pillars of our ‘divided society’. But Belgium is also a fragile reality. Its foundations tend to lose their legitimacy. It is faced with new (EU-based) practices, such as the development of accountability,
comparison, and benchmarking, that are contradictory with most policy patterns it inherited from its own past (E. Mangez, 2010).

The incidents illustrate how uncomfortable some actors are with the past and the effects of consociative democracy. In fact, the report incriminated in the first incident was about the network of relationships in which policy-makers and academics – ourselves included – are embedded, explaining why a particular university is more likely to produce a particular kind of knowledge and be close to specific types of other stakeholders and civil servants. We were not revealing any kind of conspiracy, but rather were showing the networks and relationships through which knowledge is being produced in the field. Making this explicit, turning it into an object of analysis (something to be known about) rather than keeping it as an unspoken given, is one of the causes of the difficulties we faced when reporting to our informants and to a wider audience. In addition, this particular incident is specifically critical because of the relation between the research and the interviewees: we, as researchers in the education field, were researching the work of other researchers active in the same field. We had actually turned them and their work – and not solely the things they were telling us about – into an object of analysis. Such a manoeuvre is subtle and requires precautions that were probably lacking in our initial report.

It is, however, necessary to go beyond the Belgian context to understand the critical dimension of this incident. The problem, we argue, is also about the production of knowledge about knowledge as such. In fact, our knowledge was mostly about the social and political conditions of production of their knowledge, showing how their work was embedded in social and political settings. We were by no means implying that the quality of the work of any given researcher was problematic. However, revealing the conditions of the production of knowledge may affect the very ‘authority’ of such knowledge and hence the position of its authors.

In the second incident, the knowledge we produced was critical mostly because it revealed the existence of local initiatives where actors were subverting centrally long-established boundaries. Producing knowledge about such initiatives transformed them: it made them visible and public. They then came to be seen as threatening more central arrangements and requirements for discretion. In other words, our report made public the fact that local actors were constructing a world along lines that did not correspond to any central political equilibrium and that did not respect the legal regulations of such equilibria. In fact, these local innovations were not problematic as such. They only became problematic once they were made public through our work. This incident illustrates how producing knowledge about a given reality changes the very status of such reality.

The situations we have just described emphasize that doing that kind of research about knowledge and policy requires close attention to context and to the prevailing assumptions among policy makers that inhibit certain lines of enquiry and set limits on the extent to which feedback of research evidence can be negotiated with informants. Furthermore, these reflections also have to intervene and be considered in comparative policy studies. We have to take account of the significance of context: beyond this specific case, there are many instances where knowledge production is shaped by policy makers’ assumptions, and ‘dangerous’ or controversial knowledge is suppressed by both researchers and policy makers.

Both incidents reported above also led to a challenge to ordinary commonsensical understandings of what knowledge is. Ordinary understandings of knowledge often view it as a mirror of reality. Knowledge, then, as a mirror, is not affected by, nor does it affect, the reality that it mirrors. Understanding the incidents discussed here requires that we develop a different view of what knowledge is and how it works. In fact, both incidents show that the knowledge that was produced affected the reality it was trying to understand and describe. Knowledge then comes to be seen as a very ‘active’ element in constructing the social. Quoting MacKenzie (2006) in his effort to understand the role of ‘financial models’ in shaping the market, we may emphasize that knowledge works as ‘an engine, not a camera’. We would suggest conceiving knowledge as a two-sided process which rearticulates the past and constructs the present and future. This makes it, inevitably, political.
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