



Karl-Mannheim-Chair of Cultural Sciences | Profile



The era of industrialization, of the social order of industrial society, and of the skills and abilities that were necessary in order to master it, is nearing its end. The foundations of the social order looming on the horizon are based on knowledge.

Knowledge societies are increasingly fragile; this is because the major social institutions, which still contributed quite decisively to shaping the course of the 20th century, lose their control over such societies to a remarkable degree.

We find ourselves in a transitional phase between two social formations. The observer cannot help but be struck by the growing contingency, and thus the further diminishing stability, of modern societies. The future of society is less and less a mirror-image of its past. The increasing vagueness and uncertainty of modern societies are the immediate results of the steadily climbing (and by no means unilateral) significance of a highly differentiated social institution -- namely, the scientific system and its products - for the culture and structure of our society.

The comprehensive circulation of knowledge, and the knowledge that knowledge is encroaching on all the contexts for action in modern society, result in the structures of action constructed and constituted by means of contested knowledge becoming ambivalent, fragile and open - open, indeed, to multiple interpretations by various actors.

In this sense, at least, it is thus possible to conclude that the growth of knowledge and its increasing social dissemination, paradoxically, produce greater social uncertainty and contingency and do not reduce differences of opinion, for instance, or form the basis for a more efficient control of central social institutions.

This newly-won insight into the simultaneous strength and fragility of scientific knowledge leads to the finding that the growing social significance of knowledge and society's dependence on knowledge will accompany the collapse of the intellectual authority of experts and a growing skepticism regarding the impartiality and objectivity of expert opinions. The representatives of specialized knowledge and expertise will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their cognitive authority and the trust in their professional function.

The dependence on knowledge, nevertheless, will go on increasing. For despite the demystification of knowledge, the alternative cannot mean trusting instead, more or less haphazardly, in just any belief.

It is necessary that we become acquainted with the idea of the contingency of knowledge, and bid farewell to the illusion that this situation is only a transient phenomenon, which will sooner or later disappear again.

History is by no means drawing to a close, but it has fundamentally altered. The old rules, certainties and patterns of development are no longer appropriate. The future no longer imitates the past. Thus the sense of the present condition's fragility grows. The experiences of fundamental changes are becoming more widespread. And a reserved, reticent and calm confidence replaces ebullient hopes or deep depression.