

## The Scope of my Dissertation “The Politics of Cultural Knowledge Work”

We are always attempting to retie the Gordian Knot<sup>1</sup> by crisscrossing, as often as we have to, the divide that separates exact knowledge and the exercise of power—let us say nature and culture. (Latour 1993:3)

I grew up in a small village at the foot of the Alps near the city of Lucerne in the heart of Switzerland. During my adolescence, my emotional and intellectual awareness of the whole gamut of the fragile conditions of life and human culture were impacted and formed by the unreconciled political atmosphere of the Cold War and the threats of a nuclear war between America and the former Soviet Union. Having thus experienced my childhood and adolescence, in a sense, as ontological uncertainty and menace towards the societal and cultural collective in which I was raised, a recurring dream I had as a boy was of my village being invaded by foreign military forces. Moreover, the Catholic environment with its rich cultural tradition and symbolic figurative world made me experience myself inside processes between materiality and semiosis, a very deep involvement in the reality of symbolic and sacramental spheres, religious doctrines of incarnation and trans-substantiation.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, my understanding and relationship with “human”, “nature”, and especially with “human nature” and “human culture” and the universe was deeply entangled in an awareness of a small and subtle matrix of high-stake balancing acts in a morphing environment (*sensu* Haraway)<sup>3</sup>—a struggle between the physical and the non-physical, the organic and the non-organic, the material and the semiotic, the epistemological and the political.

In September 2008 when I started writing, I was diagnosed as having Lyme disease. Lyme disease or *borreliosis* is an emerging infectious disease caused by a species of bacteria (*spirochetes*) belonging to the genus *Borrelia*.<sup>4</sup> The diagnosis coincided with the beginning of the crisis of the world’s financial systems impacting the world’s economy and markets on the global scale. The sudden realities of abused fiscal responsibility by banks, global economic recession, unemployment etc. revealed the timeliness of investigating in greater depth the significance of the topic of my dissertation, that is, to explore the role of the humanities and arts as producers of new knowledge and defenders of civilization. The biological conditions in which I was embedded and the global humanly-constructed economic and political circumstances—the complex networks of nature and

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<sup>1</sup> The *Gordian Knot* is a legend associated with Alexander the Great. It is often used as a metaphor for an intractable problem, solved by a bold stroke: “cutting the Gordian knot”.

<sup>2</sup> I “owe” Donna Haraway the awakening of my mental and emotional memories of early experiences in my Catholic childhood. On several occasions, the American sociologist and writer refers to her experience of Catholicism at a young age that had an impact on her intellectual formation. Sources: Haraway, D., Goodeve, T. N. (1997:54-55); Haraway (1997).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*:47.

<sup>4</sup> *Borreliosis*, the most common tick-borne disease in the northern hemisphere, is transmitted to humans by the bite of infected hard ticks. Early manifestations of infection may include fever, headache, fatigue and depression. Left untreated, late manifestations involving the joints, heart and nervous system can occur. In my case early indicators manifested themselves in fatigue, disturbances of the cardiac rhythm, muscle soreness and other flu-like symptoms. Source: Storl (2007); Wolf-Dieter Storl is a German-American ethnobotanist. In his work *Borreliose natürlich heilen* published in German, he explores a radically different social and empiricist understanding of *borreliosis*.

the convoluted networks of human society—led me to cogitate on the kind of taken for granted order of the contingent rhizomes to which my existence and that of other beings belonged. I began to make sense of Fritjof Capra's (2002) understanding of the connections between life, mind and society—the hidden web of life, consciousness and social reality. Furthermore, the thinking of R. Buckminster Fuller,<sup>5</sup> one of the most important American thinkers of the 20th century and visionary for the 21st century, his fascinating mix of utopian vision and organic pragmatism and credo of “more for less”, and his belief in the interconnectedness of all things encouraged me to pursue many of my thoughts and approaches articulated and developed in this thesis. It was R. Buckminster Fuller's work which sensitised me to the issue of closing the gap between the natural sciences, technology, and the humanities and arts.

My encounter with *borreliosis* framed the writing process and the entire intellectual journey. Going through the process of healing, that is, eliminating or rather inhibiting the radius of power of the *spirochetes* in my body gave me valuable insights and food for thought. My interest in the 3.5-billion- years-old bacterial pathogen leading an asymmetrical war against my life tempted me to keep track of biological and physical metaphors as I started to take tremendous pleasure in the structural-functional complexes at very tiny levels.<sup>6</sup> During the medical treatment,<sup>7</sup> I developed a respectful attitude for the inscrutability of the natural phenomena, and the complexity of the interplay between human activity and ecological and evolutionary processes.

### *A New Social and Symbolic Space for Knowledge*

The aim of my thesis is to contribute to the concept of a new communal space for knowledge—a social and symbolic space with a whole new ecology for diverse interests, knowledges and values to co-exist (Turnbull 2000). With this goal in mind, my endeavours to understand and scan the relation between “cultural work” and human knowledge occasioned the invention of a new mode of “ontological location scouting”.<sup>8</sup> The spectrum of my interests and themes began to evolve as a metaphorical cluster around the following key questions, which my work attempts to answer:

- To what type of future public cultural “spaces” of knowledge and “models” of traffic for knowledge should we aspire?
- What future “cultural work” practices are needed to sustain these “spaces”, and the ontological, epistemological, moral and ethical dimensions that our being-in-the-world entails?

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller (1895–1983) was an American architect, author, designer, futurist and visionary.

<sup>6</sup> The “true super-microorganism” borrelia bacteria outwit the body's immune system and change its function by using deceptive strategies and camouflage; they survive temperatures of up to minus 50 degrees Celsius (Storl 2007:51, 52). The spirochetes' strategy is to “excrete antibiotic toxins” or to “adopt cystic form while they fall into a long sleep until the biological environment has improved” (Ibid.:27, 51). Storl's more atheoretical understanding and socio-cultural conceptualization of *borreliosis* made me to rethink what it means to be “alive”—biologically, socially, culturally and also in terms of my own learning and “knowing”.

<sup>7</sup> I took *doxycycline*, Pfizer's first once-a-day broad-spectrum antibiotic, which made me lose five kilos in weight, and I followed Storl's recommendations by using a plant named *Fuller's Teasel* (*Dipsacus fullonum*) for which a number of medical properties, though not proven in medical trials, are claimed among them curing Lyme disease, antibiotic properties and improved circulation.

<sup>8</sup> The term was used by Haraway to describe her working methods. See Haraway, D., Goodeve, T. N. (1997:46)

- How should the contingency of human experience and knowledge be addressed in domains of cultural production and humanities- and arts-based civic dialogues?
- What answers to these questions support the retying of the Gordian Knot?

These questions, I am tempted to say, are rooted in my childhood and adolescence. They have “materialised” or rather ripened in my mind in the past 50 years, and thus today express my commitments and very personal concerns with the contemporary problems of rationality, reflexivity, transdisciplinarity, globalization and ecological thinking and acting—and especially those relating to the rational and authoritative forms of knowledge that my people and my culture have created. I wish to state that this dissertation was written in the spirit of my search of grasping and defining an imaginary, non-ideological and open mental space from which to nurture our knowledges, science, technology, objects, things, and the nature of the finite world which we inhabit. In many of the conferences that I have organised in Lucerne I had the opportunity to exchange ideas about the nature of life, civilization, consciousness, social reality, technology and culture, and other issues with the invited speakers and guests. I am grateful for these dialogues and stimulating conversations and the great people, individuals, colleagues and friends that I have met during the past 20 years. They have supported and encouraged me to pursue and develop new concepts and ideas for new conferences, meetings and projects.

### *Redefining the Politics and Ecology of Cultural Work*

I was 13 years old in 1968 when Stewart Brand published the *Whole Earth Catalog*. At that time, I was too young to understand that this was—alongside the landing on the moon a year later and the paramount aesthetic revelation of seeing the Earth, the “Blue Marble”, from a distance—the beginning of the “environment”. 40 years later, this whole environment—our home planet—is at stake due to climate change and environmental destruction, which is potentially disastrous for life and civilization. Thus, my highest ambition is to contribute with this work to a theoretical framework of legitimate considerations in which reflections of how to modify our anthropology of creation may contribute to a finer sense of possibility for the cultural production and dissemination of knowledge, the redefinition of the *politics* and *ecology* of cultural work, and the exploration of a practice-based epistemology for humanities- and arts-based civic dialogues. I believe in the necessity to reposition and reorient the humanities and the arts within knowledge. To study the cultural production of knowledge and how knowledge spaces are manufactured offers both an understanding of the interrelatedness of knowledge and power, and the limitations of science and technology in solving the problems of human life.