TOWARDS A NEW EUROPE? A COMMENT
COMMENT ON ANDREAS WIRSCHING’S ANNUAL LECTURE, WASHINGTON DC, NOVEMBER 13, 2014

Jeffrey J. Anderson
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to serve as a commentator for this well-respected lecture series. Dr. Wirsching, the guest of honor this evening, has provided a comprehensive and thought-provoking analysis of the role of knowledge as a possible agent of progressive change in Europe over the past thirty years, drawing attention to the great potential that lies at the intersection of science, technology, and education. In his remarks, he discussed the origins of the concept of the “knowledge society,” and the sources of the high hopes and expectations that accompanied it. He also traced the formulation and implementation of public policy based on the idea of the knowledge society at both the national and European levels, drawing attention to the intimate ties of these initiatives to the neoliberal revolution in the late 1970s and 1980s, which took the form of sweeping deregulation and privatization schemes at the national level within Europe as well as completion of the single market at the European level.

Dr. Wirsching also notes that “knowledge society” policies were a follow-on and complement to the neoliberal revolution, seeking to unlock the potential of the individual worker and, by extension, economy and society by targeting the development and improvement of “human capital.” It is important to underscore that this was a powerfully attractive idea across the political spectrum. On the right, approaches based on the concept of the knowledge society were consistent with the ideology of individual responsibility and liberty: workers could achieve liberation through education. On the left, these policies were consistent with the ideology of equality and egalitarianism, promising knowledge for all, regardless of class origin or social station. At the EU level, the policy approach represented a technocrat’s dream: solving problems efficiently and consensually through the application of knowledge.

Dr. Wirsching concluded his remarks on a somewhat gloomy note, pointing out the contradictions, pitfalls, and unintended consequences of the knowledge society phenomenon. It appears that the concept
has yet to produce results, and where one can identify the effects of knowledge society policies, they appear to be system-reinforcing, exacerbating inequality and social exclusion, not liberating.

I share Dr. Wirsching’s conclusions. It is indeed appropriate to be sober-minded about the possibility of transformation through knowledge. It strikes me that what we have here is a classic case of the fallacy of composition. As you know, the fallacy of composition arises when one implies that something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of some part of the whole. In the case of knowledge, transformation of the individual through knowledge is not only possible, it is virtually a cliché. And yet, it does not necessarily follow that transformation of the collective through knowledge is possible. What one might call “Wandel durch Aufklärung” appears to be little more than a pipe dream or fantasy.

I will confine myself here to two sets of general comments on the presentation. The first relates to knowledge as an independent agent of change or transformation. Of course, we can trace this idea back to the Enlightenment. The most recent chapter in this uplifting narrative is the social media revolution, which promises the instantaneous diffusion of information and — arguably — knowledge via Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. It appears that this revolution holds the potential to bring down authoritarian regimes, as the Orange Revolution and the Arab Spring suggest. It can even shine a light on injustice within established democracies; witness recent events in Ferguson, Missouri.

In short, there exists at least some evidence that the information/technology revolution, or the rapid diffusion of knowledge, can, under the right circumstances, challenge and even overcome existing structures of power and influence in modern societies. But not always. Indeed, the explosion of information and the widening access to knowledge has coincided with an unprecedented expansion of socio-economic inequality around the world, both within and between nations. It would not take much effort to link the explosion of knowledge to growing disparities in wealth and income, with the mechanism of unequal access to knowledge as the smoking gun. Thus, it appears that the knowledge revolution exerts contradictory impacts on the world around us. It can challenge political structures under certain circumstances, but at the same time it reinforces and perhaps even exacerbates existing economic and social divisions.
My second set of comments is directed at the notion of “knowledge as empowerment,” in particular the ensuing political implications. As Dr. Wirsching rightly notes, the doctrine of knowledge is about societal impact, but its actual impact, viewed in terms of where policy is actually implemented, takes place at the individual level. The individual is responsible for his or her own success, and thus bears responsibility not only for improvement and success, but also for failure — or at least it can be portrayed this way. There is, I believe, an oft-overlooked political dimension to this phenomenon. Take the example of Silicon Valley. The new generation of “techies” making careers there fit the description of Drucker’s “knowledge worker,” who disposes of an advanced education and great spatial and professional flexibility; he can swiftly change jobs and employers and he is able to repeatedly acquire highly specialized knowledge. All this enables him to act in complete autonomy on the labour market and to choose between many different options vis-à-vis his personal career. In the end, power in the workplace will shift from bosses to knowledge workers.¹

My question: is this phenomenon, which is intimately related to the knowledge revolution, providing new impulses for libertarian politics and ideas? Here, one’s personal experience — the technologically savvy master of the universe, in complete control of his or her own personal destiny — fosters support for a collective ideology: libertarianism. The irony, of course, is that libertarianism as a political movement is backed by powerful vested interests and resources. And so we return to the dark side of the knowledge revolution: inequality.

Jeffrey J. Anderson is the Graf Goltz Professor and Director of the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University. His research focuses on European political economy, with special emphasis on the European Union and postwar Germany. He earned his B.A. from Pomona College and his Ph.D. in political science from Yale University. He has published widely; among the books he has written are German Unification and the Union of Europe: The Domestic Politics of Integration Policy (Cambridge UP, 1999) and The Territorial Imperative: Pluralism, Corporatism and Economic Crisis (Cambridge UP, 2007).

¹ Peter Drucker, Landmarks of Tomorrow (New York, 1959).