UNESCO'S ROAD TOWARD KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Though traditionally perceived as a more liberal international organisation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is part and parcel of the "development machine". Inspired by post-structural thinking in development studies and Jessop's (2004) cultural political economy approach, we examine the organisation's 2005 World Report *Towards Knowledge Societies* as a text of development construing and constructing particular discourses. First, we introduce the knowledge-based economy discourse and the information society discourse. Then we situate UNESCO's report as an attempt to provide an alternative to the die-hard information society discourse. Next, we argue that through its allegiance to knowledge-based economy reasoning (concerning education and learning; globalisation and development), UNESCO in this report actually endorses and helps to construct the discourse on the information society. The convergence of information society, knowledge-based economy and neo-liberal thinking has very real material consequences because it provides the ideal discursive context for the ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) paradigm, the newest development craze which may be little more than a reissue of the old modernisation paradigm.

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Introduction

Various strands of post-structural thinking in development studies have approached development as discourse.[1] This conceptualisation implies that development is seen as an interconnected ensemble of languages and practices which form a modernist regime where knowledge and disciplinary power are articulated (Crush 1995a, xiii; Escobar 1995a). In line with the "cultural turn" (Sum & Jessop 2003, 1002), it focuses particularly on the texts of development: the reports, papers, articles, assessments, etc. which use specific words and terms to construct the management and intervention which the world needs, which imply what expertise and knowledge is authoritative (and what not) and which endorse and reproduce specific power relations (Crush 1995b, 3-5).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which to a large extent became a development agency focusing on operational activities since about 1960 (Hoggart 1978, 31), is usually perceived as a more liberal international organisation that gives attention to traditionally weaker actors and neglected themes in the international arena. Most recently, for example, UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is celebrated by many as (at least symbolically) counterbalancing the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) perspective on culture. Nevertheless, we argue that UNESCO is part and parcel of the "development machine" (Ferguson 1990) and in this article we examine one of its development texts through close textual reading (Said 2003, 23-24), in order to analyse the position of its author in relation to the discourse on the knowledge-based economy and ultimately the information society. The added value of this approach is that it imports a different view than is usual in communication research engaging with UNESCO's policies[2] and makes possible a much-needed fresh look into the matter.

In this article, we first look at the knowledge-based economy and information society discourses. Then we situate UNESCO's 2005 world report *Towards Knowledge Societies* as an attempt to provide an alternative to the die-hard information society discourse. Third, we argue that through its allegiance to knowledge-based economy reasoning (concerning education and learning; globalisation and development), UNESCO in this report actually endorses and helps to construct the discourse on the information society.

The Knowledge-based Economy

The discourse on the knowledge-based economy can be comprehended through Jessop's (2004) cultural political economy approach. Cultural political economy makes a distinction between the "actually existing economy", the unstructured and chaotic totality of economic activities, and the "economy," which consists of subsets of economic relations that become the targeted objects of intervention. "Economic imaginaries" are discursively constitutive forces in singling out subsets of economic activities. They develop as economic, political and intellectual forces seek to focus on a (re)definition of particular subsets of economic activities and try to devise strategies and visions which correspond to these "imagined economies". Although no imagined economy will ever be fully constituted due to competing economic imaginaries, successful and powerful economic imaginaries are performative in

that they transform and naturalise specific economic relations and instrumentalities and as such are engaged in constituting their own objects of governance. So we can conceive of economic imaginaries as not only offering a semiotic framework for interpreting economic events but also constructing economic events and their contexts. The knowledge-based economy then can be thought of as a very powerful economic imaginary that responds to the crisis of Atlantic Fordism and contributes to the functioning of post-Fordist economies (Jessop 2004, 1-9).

The concept of the knowledge-based economy first popped up in the United States debates on post-industrialism in the 1960s and 1970s. It resurged in the 1990s through the active promotion of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which as a think-thank for policy-makers is always looking for frameworks to offer a comprehensive view on the workings of the economy (Godin 2006, 18, 23). But there is more. Essential as it is to historically situate every piece of theoretical knowledge as man made constructions serving man defined purposes (Horkheimer 1972, 28, 35), we draw attention to Jessop's explanation:

> *The rise of the KBE [knowledge-based economy] as a master narrative is not innocent. ... [It] prompted a concerted campaign to develop the material and ideological basis for a new accumulation strategy based on the deepening and widening of the KBE and the massive extension of intellectual property rights to protect and enlarge the dominance of US capital for the anticipated next long wave. This reflects a neo-liberal policy for productive capital that safeguards US superprofits behind the cloak of free trade in intellectual property and so complements its neo-liberal policy for financial capital. The new strategy was translated into a successful hegemonic campaign* (Jessop 2004, 16-17).

Nowadays the knowledge-based economy agenda has been adopted by leading political forces from the international level through the regional and national level to the local level (Jessop 2004, 17). It serves as an encompassing framework that is being articulated in many organisational and institutional sites and is translated in different functional systems through compatible visions and strategies. Examples of KBE-related terms in technology are expert systems, innovation systems, smart machines, information and communication technologies (ICT); in relation to the economy one speaks of knowledge management, learning organisations, e-commerce, reflexive accumulation; labour is redefined through concepts like teleworking, immaterial labour, tacit knowledge; prominent concepts in law are intellectual property rights, rights to information, immaterial objects; et cetera (Jessop 2005, 154-155; Sum 2006).

Semiosis thus playing an important role "in securing social reproduction through the selection and retention of mutually supportive discourses", it should be noted that especially during periods of crisis in or of the existing economic order diverse economic, political and socio-cultural discourses may entwine in attempting to explain problems by referring to the failures of the past and the possibilities of the future (Jessop 2004, 11, 14). The information society discourse and the discourse on the knowledge-based economy are such mutually supportive discourses (Geray & Başaran Özdemir 2006; Jessop 2005, 154).

The Information Society

The information society discourse also has its roots in the alleged transition of western societies from the industrial age to the post-industrial or information age. The development of new technologies would lead to the possibility for everyone to retrieve information and enhance communication. During the 1970s, information society proponents had propagated the idea that the telecommunications infrastructure should be treated as a public service. However, in the following Reagan and Thatcher dominated decade a market-based and private sector driven approach was pursued (Ó Siochrú 2004a, 204-206). This particular vision was extended at the international level in the 1990s with Al Gore's call for a Global Information Infrastructure (GII); the 1993 World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreement (signed by 130 countries) which treats communication as a service; the 1995 G7 Ministerial Conference on the Information Society; the 1997 WTO Agreement on Basic Telecommunications Service (signed by 69 countries) and it is still the dominant approach today[3] (Van Audenhove & Nulens 2003, 248-251; Servaes & Carpentier 2006, 6). At the European level, the opening up of domestic markets in the light of converging broadcasting, telecommunication, and information policies is embedded in the 1997 Green Paper on the Convergence of the Telecommunications, Media and Information Technology and the 2003 Regulatory Framework for Electronic Communications Networks and Services (Servaes & Carpentier, 2006, 6).

The bigger part of the information society discourse enunciates a technological deterministic, utopian promise: "work will be transformed, education upturned, corporate structures revitalised, democracy itself reassessed – all because of the 'information revolution'" (Webster 2002, 4). This discourse constantly stresses the benefits of ICT and hardly ever makes explicit the suppositions that it carries with. In a seemingly self-feeding and reinforcing way it resounds in various domains of social life: it is present in popular paperback books, at the university where social scientists focus on the social effects of increasing computer use, in a myriad of political and business speeches and in an uncountable flood of journalism stressing the upheaval that ICT will bring in our daily lives (Webster 2002, 4; Preston 2001, 4).

Though the notion of the information society is highly contestable (Raboy & Landry 2004, 13, 103; Servaes & Carpentier 2006, 5; Webster 2002, 5), the discourse is more than ever present at the international level through the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the two-phase summit (hosted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in collaboration with UNESCO) which took place in Geneva (Switzerland) in December 2003 and in Tunis (Tunisia) in November 2005 and which resulted in four official documents.[4] Some authors have stressed positive outcomes of the WSIS (e.g. the "multi-stakeholder" approach, which created the opportunity for civil society to participate in the summit, though there is still considerable disagreement as to the nature of this participation (or incorporation)). Others have criticised the summit for several reasons. Next to focusing on the WSIS official output documents, it may for instance be interesting to critically examine those other WSIS outcomes, namely the numerous public private partnerships which have been forged amongst UN agencies, governments, corporations and some civil society organisations during the WSIS process (McLaughlin 2006). We have tried to do this, focusing on UNESCO and Microsoft specifically[5] (Leye 2007). Concerning the official texts, the accusations of omissions are most important:

there is no critical examination of intellectual property rights or trade in goods and services (Servaes & Carpentier 2006, 12), there is no mentioning of the concentration of ownership of mainstream media or of the potential of community media (Ó Siochrú 2004b, 50). Moreover, just like in past discussions on the strengthening of infrastructure of developing countries' communication systems, today's debates are revolving around issues of connectivity and ignore "the why, who, under what conditions and with what implications" (Moll & Regan Shade 2004). Taking into account that about a third of the world has no or very limited access to electricity (S. Buckley cited in Raboy & Landry 2004, 128), WSIS can be accused of overt technological determinism, repeating modernisation thinking in its assertion that the mere deployment of and access to technology will lead to development and propagating a vision of technology as evidently commercially driven.

Both the knowledge-based economy and the information society discourse celebrate the advent of a radically different economy or society by focussing on the immaterial. Knowledge or information are replacing capital and become the intangible driving forces of the economy. This obscures the fact that there may be more continuity than change, as existing power relations abide. In the economic realm capital "remains as dependent as ever upon relatively fixed, place-bound technological-institutional ensembles in which technology, the means of production, forms of industrial organisation and labour-power are productively combined to create and extract surplus-value" (Brenner cited in Jessop 2000, 346). In addition, as concerns communication, the view that information is replacing capital is dangerous because it implicitly presupposes that it does not matter how the means of communication are owned and for what purposes (Nerone *et al*. 1995, 151).

Knowledge Societies

UNESCO takes great pains with proving it does not endorse the typical technological deterministic information society discourse and aimed at assuring its own distinct position at the WSIS ("The technological and knowledge revolution bequeathed us from the twentieth century has lent the Organisation's mandate a fresh dimension, for the now more strategic and complex challenges we face are all the more stimulating as a result" (UNESCO 2005, 6)) by stressing the importance of a human-centred approach. As such the organisation also succeeds to the extent that even critical researchers still take the organisation's critical or alternative approach for granted, as exemplified in the reflection that "WSIS could perhaps been a very different space had it not been hosted by the ITU [International Telecommunication Union] but UNESCO, now everything was framed by default by ITU's a-historical don't-even-think-of-mentioning-NWICO techno-managerialism" (Lovink & Zehle 2005, 8). The organisation distances itself from the common information society discourse by conceiving the advent of "knowledge societies" instead, a term issued for the first time in 1969 by Peter Drucker and elaborated by Stehr (1994) and Mansell and Wehn (1998). Knowledge is, similar to knowledge-based economy or information society visions, seen as increasingly determining the nature and identity of society: "knowledge society" then replaces "capitalist society" or "industrial society" as a concept for analysing the nature and workings of modern society (Stehr 1994, 6). However, knowledge societies are usually preferred over the concept of the information society to stress that there are many historical and

contextual dependent possibilities for constructing future knowledge societies and that ICT rather than as panaceas should be regarded as tools, which still must be combined with the knowledge of human beings (Servaes & Carpentier 2006, 5).

UNESCO expressed its vision of the concept in the publication of its 2005 World Report *Towards Knowledge Societies*, stressing the fact that in its "future-oriented reflection ... [w]hat must be sought are lines of reflection and action for making communication and information serve the transmission of knowledge, a diffusion one would want set fast in time and wide in space, operating between generations and between cultures" (2005, 6). This is surely praiseworthy, as are the envisioned pillars of knowledge societies (UNESCO 2005, 188-189): enhancement of the value of existing forms of knowledge to narrow the digital divide; more participatory knowledge societies; a better integration of knowledge policies; and the recommendations addressed at governments, governmental and non-governmental organisations, the private sector and civil society, to:

1. *Invest more in quality education for all to ensure equal opportunity*
2. *Increase places of community access to information and communication technologies*
3. *Widen the contents available for universal access to knowledge*
4. *Develop collaboratories: towards better scientific knowledge sharing*
5. *Share environmental knowledge for sustainable development*
6. *Making linguistic diversity a priority: the challenges of multilingualism*
7. *Move towards knowledge certification on the internet: quality labels*
8. *Intensify the creation of partnerships for digital solidarity*
9. *Increase women's contribution to knowledge societies*
10. *Measure knowledge: towards knowledge society indicators?*

(UNESCO 2005, 191-194)

In fact, we think anyone would endorse these intentions, pillars, and recommendations. The fact that no one would reasonably oppose such laudable goals has two paradoxical effects: on the one hand, they have a great appeal, but on the other hand, they raise a hurdle for critically examining not only what UNESCO precisely expects from the future knowledge societies but also how UNESCO interprets today's world (in the light of the future).

UNESCO is able to unite its typical concepts and themes in one concept by creating a dichotomy consisting of the information society on the one hand and knowledge societies on the other. This enables the organisation to (seemingly) take a stance against today's excesses, for example by warning for "the potential for exclusion that knowledge societies may contain when their growth is reduced to the promotion of a knowledge economy or information society" (UNESCO 2005, 26, also 169, 185-186). Yet, because its conception of knowledge societies is projected onto the future, there is no need to assess just what may be going wrong today as regards economical matters. This leads to rather naive assertions, like the idea that computer refurbishment programmes "based on voluntary decisions by individuals, companies, organisations and governments in the industrialised countries, and on a principle of sharing, would attest to a spirit of *digital solidarity* that could help to mitigate the economic inequalities that foster the digital divide" (p. 34). We have argued elsewhere (Leye 2007) that this is absurd. First, because of the fact that what is presented as "a spirit of digital solidarity" may in fact be a

very convenient solution for disposing of the redundant computer arsenal of the developed countries (the maintenance cost for older hardware there being often higher than the cost of new hardware). Second, because of the highly contestable assumption that charitable action will lead to a solution to gross structural economic inequalities. The economy is however tellingly conspicuous by its absence, because omission of any meaningful economic analysis can actually be seen as an endorsement of the present (and future) workings of the economy. The endorsement of the present economic state of affairs is also present in the numerous modernisation-like references to the need for developing countries to catch up with the developed countries (UNESCO 2005, 46, 50, 159, 167, 169), which is quite paradoxical because UNESCO also says it does not want to see one single specific development model imposed on all countries.

All this is completely in line with the present day hegemonic neo-liberal view that the economy has entered the realm of nature. Like the laws of nature, the laws of the economy cannot but be obeyed, the market will bring prosperity (Mestrum 2005, 94). But when we examine *Towards Knowledge Societies* through close textual reading (Said 2003, 23-24), we find that links with the hegemonic economic discourse on the knowledge-based economy are to be found in UNESCO's reasoning. In that way, it becomes clear that UNESCO helps to construct this discourse via its vision on education and learning in the knowledge societies.

Education and Learning in the Knowledge Societies

According to UNESCO "[t]he social changes brought about by the new technologies can only lead to the emergence of knowledge societies under certain conditions – which … are those associated with *learning* societies" (UNESCO 2005, 54-55). The inevitability of the fact that education will "cover the whole community and the whole lifetime of the individual" is exemplified in such phrases as "[i]n an increasingly complex world, where anyone may need to ply more than one trade in the course of a working career, lifelong learning becomes indispensable" (p. 57). There is no questioning of *why* lifelong learning (one of the key concepts in the knowledge-based economy discourse (Jessop 2005, 144, 160; Foray 2002, 5)) has become/is becoming indispensable. This is attributed either to the changes which inevitably come with the deployment of ICT[6] (*cf. supra*, the first quote of this paragraph) or to an increasingly insecure and unpredictable world order ("an increasingly complex world" (p. 57), "[a]s accelerating change challenges the old patterns and increasing importance is given to "learning by doing" and innovative capacity, the knowledge dynamics of our societies have become a major issue" (p. 57)). In both cases there is no room for human agency, the need for lifelong learning has come into being naturally, there are no motives for promoting it. Moreover, it is asserted that "[t]he "learning" model has spread far beyond the world of education, into every cranny of economic and social life" (p. 57). In fact the reverse may be the case, because as because as Robinson notes, the knowledge economy operates by commodifying "every nook and cranny of social life" (quoted in Graham 1999, 486), including education.

The same negation of the economical is applied to the notion of "innovation," a key concept in the discourse on the knowledge-based economy which is concerned with commercial applications of inventions and is identified as the driving force

par excellence of the knowledge-based economy (see e.g. Cooke & Leydesdorff 2006, 5; Tiffin & Jimenez 2006, 61-62; De Laurentis 2006, 79; David & Foray 2002, 11; Hatchuel et al. 2002, 29-30; Lam 2002, 75-76; Feldman 2002; Dunning 2000, 2). In UNESCO's eyes innovation is "going well beyond the notion of technical innovation in the global knowledge economy to become a new value in itself, as its spread through field after field indicates- education, politics, the media and indeed culture in general" (UNESCO 2005, 58). The explanation of the concept of innovation subsequently takes a strange turn: it "has no independent existence, but only arises when an invention finds an entrepreneur who gives it value, while meeting a social demand" (p. 58). So, on the one hand it is acknowledged that innovation is economic, on the other hand, it is also has a social component. The latter vision is further elaborated: "Nowadays, we take into account the interaction between the general public and the world of science, technology and industry … the general public makes its appearance as an agent of innovation in its own right. In some cases, the collective will driving an innovation is as much the work of the public, as that of the engineers, or even more so" (pp. 58-59). The "adoption of the internet" is given as an example illustrating "the new way in which technological projects and the habits of the general public interact" (pp. 58-59). One can question though, how much influence this "collective will" actually has, the mere use of the term "adoption" already indicating a rather small margin for interaction.

Digressing a little, we also note that this view is moreover particularly disturbing at a time when budgets for Research and Development (R&D) are almost entirely confined to what is expected to be delivering the greatest profits. For example, this is the case for R&D in medicines: "Less than 10% of global medical research today is concerned with illnesses which occur predominantly in developing countries and which affect about 90% of the global population. This abyss is commonly referred to as "10/90." Hardly 1% of the 1400 new medicines, which entered the marketplace during the last 25 years, concern these illnesses. 15 in total!" (Pecoul & Alesandrini 2005, 52; my translation). This is not to say that UNESCO is unaware of this. It mentions this situation and places it in the context of a so-called scientific divide (2005, 110). However, when assessing the causes of this scientific divide it is only mentioned that it "arises primarily from the conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced, received and diffused" (UNESCO 2005, 106-107). Although it requires the political will of the rich nations and "new rules of the game … in a competitive economy where the conquest of markets remains the rule" (Pecoul & Alesandrini 2005, 57, my translation) to do away with this situation, references to the global economy are not to be found in UNESCO's reasoning. Quite the contrary, it is advised that in developing countries "[t]o bridge the digital divide, it is therefore necessary to put in place interface and network structures so that … research institutions can integrate the logic of the market and technological innovation in their functioning" (UNESCO 2005, 106).

Returning to innovation, we draw attention to the final piece of its conceptualisation, which is described as follows: "It is precisely because innovation has become largely unforeseeable that it is important to concentrate on the conditions that favour the *process* of innovation: for they constitute the only factor that it [*sic*] is in our power to affect" (p. 59). Here the mechanism as described above is at work: innovation is unforeseeable due to the increasingly instable, complex, and unexplainable world. Remains the question what is meant by "the conditions that

favour the *process* of innovation", an answer to which is soon provided:

> *Knowing that there is often a violence inherent in times of foundation, can we really not envisage that … this challenging of established practice and knowledge will itself crucially depend on the development of individual and collective capacities? This is the true issue for societies, which are going to need to be both knowledge societies and innovation societies – and must therefore become learning societies.*
>
> *Tomorrow's jobs will be more and more a matter of producing, exchanging and transforming information or knowledge. … The demand for learning will be greater than ever, but its expression will be different: the object will no longer be an apprenticeship in one specific type of activity, which scientific and technological progress may very well make obsolete in no time. In an innovation society, the demand for knowledge will be in terms of ever-recurring needs for re-skilling* (UNESCO 2005, 59).

So "the only factor that is in our power to affect" is education, schooling, learning, skilling and re-skilling.[7] Learning societies where "education is no longer the privilege of an elite" (p. 57) are actually operationalised as and reduced to the creation of a workforce adapted to the global knowledge-based economy which is taken as a given. Flexibility will be unavoidable ("the object of the demand for learning will no longer be an apprenticeship in one specific type of activity", "ever-recurring needs for re-skilling") due to scientific and technological progress which clearly leaves no room for human agency. Though UNESCO also mentions that some experts have warned against a danger of people becoming moulded to fit the demands of the economy and the employers, it asserts that "[i]t is not lifelong education as such, but insufficient and poor-quality education, that may lead to the individual's subservience" (p. 79-80). In the same vein, there are also references to be found to an impending international division of labour with R&D and high tech labour taking place in developed countries while low-skilled and low tech labour is provided by developing countries (pp. 95, 104, 106), but this remains unexplained. Those "critical" remarks notwithstanding, lifelong learning is wrapped up in a story of "collective capacities" (cf. also "the collective will driving innovation"') covering the "whole community and the whole lifetime of the individual" (p. 57). The interpretation of learning societies, innovation societies and knowledge societies in this way helps to construct the unity, which came to dominate the worldview of the international organisations after the Cold War. International cooperation between states has been replaced by global cooperation between states, the private sector, and civil society. The world has become one big market space and everyone can and must be integrated into this global economy (Mestrum 2005, 19).

The ultimate justification for schooling and education is then economic rather than social, civic or moral in nature. This workforce-readying function of education, here in the context of perceived knowledge-based economies, may however be not so new, because as Holly wrote about UNESCO in 1981:

> *No other international organization seems more inoffensive and less related to accumulation. UNESCO is perceived as a cultural organization interested in development and the diffusion of knowledge. Because of the forceful presentation of its educational action in the Third World as a disinterested*

contribution to economic development, no one has ever examined the relationship between UNESCO's workforce development efforts and installation of a minimal infrastructure for this workforce development on the one hand and the necessities of the valorisation of capital becoming more and more internationalized on the other hand (Holly 1981, 11, my translation).

Globalisation and Development

The dominant discourse on globalisation is another strand of thinking related to the knowledge-based economy discourse. Globalisation is represented in *Towards Knowledge Societies* as a force in itself, usually coupled with references to ICT which are also described as autonomous forces without taking the economical, political or social context into account: "The Third Industrial Revolution – the revolution of the new technologies – and the new phase of globalization that accompanies it, have swept away many familiar landmarks and accentuated the divisions between rich and poor" (UNESCO 2005, 27, also 45, 61, 63, 111, 188). The inevitable instability and insecurity which comes along with the uncontrollable forces of technological progress and globalisation (pp. 61, 80, 111, 133) have to be dealt with by states and individuals but cannot be directed. This absence of human agency is a feature of the technocratic discourse on globalisation, it naturalises human conceptions about the economy and obscures the fact that globalisation and technology are a site of political and economic struggle. The abstraction of globalisation is constructed and used by policymakers (mostly at the national level) as a ground for sweeping reforms (McKenna & Graham 2000, 224, 238). In addition to this construction of globalisation, examples are found of references to the obsolescence of the national level which is evidently giving way to the global as the natural level of analysis with the advent of network societies (UNESCO 2005, 92, 102), which seems consistent with the observation that the national economy is being replaced by the globalising knowledge-driven economy as the primary object of economic governance (Jessop 2000, 343).

The dominant discourse on globalisation also affects the debate about the politics of the state, which has its effects on the conceptualisation of the role of the state for pursuing traditional welfare goals (Palan & Cameron 2004, 15-17). Governments are urged to provide "an enabling legal environment [which] calls for intellectual property policies favourable to foreign investors" (UNESCO 2005, 105, 145), they should see to the complementation of scientific and industrial policies and the harmonisation of public and private sector action (p. 106). This changing role of the state is in line with the reorientation of national development projects urged by the United Nations and international financial institutions since more than a decade and the call to focus instead on the reduction of poverty, which presupposes "good governance". Poor people need to learn how to help themselves by acquiring the necessary human capital and skills to take part in the global economy. The shifting focus towards the global (international organisations see to the achievement of poverty reduction and the Millennium Development Goals) and the local (the individual is responsible for seizing his own opportunities) leaves hardly any room for the provision of social services[8] at the national level (Mestrum 2005).

Development now revolves around knowledge (this is also the case for economic growth, both concepts becoming synonyms like in the heydays of modernisation):

"*knowledge societies* ... are a source of development for all, first and foremost for the least developed countries ... For the link between knowledge and development is fundamental to the building of knowledge societies – knowledge being both a tool for the satisfaction of economic needs and a constitutive component of development" (UNESCO 2005, 27-28). Knowledge is a source of empowerment and capacity building (19-20, 159, 163, 167). Knowledge as the engine of development also brings a new connotation to certain concepts. As such, the knowledge divide will only be overcome "if developing countries increase considerably their investments in building up real knowledge capacities, while improving the conditions for the exchange and sharing of knowledge (good governance, freedom of expression, etc.)" (p. 167).

Moreover, the free flow of information and the freedom of expression, traditionally associated with media flows and the freedom of the press, are reinterpreted in line with the notions of good governance and institutional capacity building at the core of poverty reduction strategies as promoted by the international financial institutions headed by the World Bank: "The transparency associated therewith [with the free flow of information and freedom of expression] contributes to the stability of the economic environment, to building and restoring the confidence essential to any sustainable development of human activities, to the efficiency of market transactions and to the development of democracy" (p. 43). Knowledge is of such utmost importance to development that it divides the developed countries from the less developed:

> *There is a basic divide overlying all the divides previously described – whether the* digital divide *between the "connected ones" and those relegated to the sidelines of the world information society, the* science divide, *the* education divide *and the* culture divide *(not to mention the divides that affect particular population groups such as the young and the old, men and women, minorities, migrants or the disabled). This fault line is nothing but the* knowledge divide *between those who have access to knowledge and participate in knowledge-sharing, and the others, those relegated to the sidelines of the knowledge societies* (UNESCO 2005, 160).

Focusing on knowledge, knowledge building, and human capacity building enables UNESCO to downplay structural economic, political, and political economic inequalities that divide developed from developing countries. This is in line with the World Bank conception of the role of knowledge: developing countries do not lack economic resources or money; they lack knowledge (Geray & Başaran Özdemir 2006). In the World Bank's policy the articulation of discourses on competitiveness, the knowledge based economy and development come together in a new hegemonic development governmentality focusing on knowledge and capacity building at the micro and macro level (Sum 2006). So UNESCO can be seen to corroborate this hegemonic development conception, portraying globalisation and technology as forces in themselves, legitimising a new role for the state as the provider of an enabling environment adapted to the needs of the global economy and endorsing/constructing development as essentially revolving around knowledge and capacity building. Moreover, we would even go as far as to argue that UNESCO, just like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is growing ever closer to the World Bank (Martens 2005, 2; Lee 2006, 25).

Conclusion

By creating a dichotomy consisting of the information society (concerned with issues of technology and connectivity) on the one hand and knowledge societies (focusing on social, cultural, and ethical dimensions) on the other, UNESCO in *Towards Knowledge Societies* seemingly takes a stance against the reduction of knowledge societies to an information society. However, as we have shown, the ostensibly cultural and human-centred approach to knowledge societies evidenced in *Towards Knowledge Societies* actually helps to reproduce the hegemonic discourse on the knowledge-based economy. This may be due to the capacity of the knowledge-based economy discourse as a master narrative to be inflected to suit different interests, which creates space within the discourse for (slightly) diverging discourses, which nevertheless reproduce the overall framing discourse. So when observing "that the KBE has not only been 'selected' from among the many competing discourses about post-Fordist futures but is now being 'retained' through a complex and heterogeneous network of practices across diverse systems and scales of action" (Jessop 2004, 16-18), we can certainly assert that UNESCO has a place in this network and moreover also reaches across different systems and scales, ranging from providing advisory services to national governments to supporting projects at the local level.

Being mutually supportive discourses, the adherence to the knowledge-based economy discourse reinforces information society thinking. Moreover, the knowledge-based economy being approachable in a neo-liberal, neo-corporatist, neo-statist and neo-communitarian way (Jessop 2005, 157), the discursive constructions at work here can also be interpreted in the context of the overall shift towards neoliberalism in the United Nations system (Bull et al. 2004, 484). The combination of these mutually reinforcing strands of neo-liberalism, knowledge-based economy and information society thinking provides the excellent context for the ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) paradigm, the newest in a series of "attempts to salvage development through fashionable notions such as 'sustainable development', 'grassroots development', 'women and development', 'market-friendly development'" (Escobar 1995b, 215). This ICT4D craze, an a-historical reissue of the old modernisation paradigm, is also put into practice by UNESCO, for example in its cooperation with Microsoft, which should be critically questioned (Leye 2007).

We are led to ask why UNESCO is neglecting basic structural economic, political, and political economic problems concerning the information society / knowledge societies. The preface to *Towards Knowledge Societies* by UNESCO's director-general Koïchiro Matsuura may be a good illustration of the reason of this ignorance. It starts with saying that "Education, science, culture and communication: the scope of UNESCO's field of competence ensures the relevance of its mission, while pointing to its increasing complexity" and ends with stating that "The premises and projects we offer here in the first *UNESCO World Report* all emphasise the need to renew an ethic for the guidance of emerging knowledge societies, an ethic of freedom and responsibility. An ethic that, let us repeat, will rest upon the sharing of knowledge" (UNESCO 2005, 5-6). By explicitly stressing the fields of competence of the organisation, the director-general evokes the narrow constitutional approach adopted since 1989 as a response to the politicisation

accusations, which had led to the withdrawal of the United States in 1984 and of the United Kingdom and Singapore in 1985.[9] Because it was the famous NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order) debate that had caused the major upheaval, this "return"[10] to the constitution encompassed the avoidance of any critically questioning of (communication, information, and media) imbalances. The ethical approach referred to at the end of Matsuura's preface then turns out to be neglecting contentious economic, political, and political economic issues, for the sake of the very continued existence of the organisation.

Notes:

1. This paper is a revised and extended version of a presentation given at the "Debating the Knowledge-Based Economy" Conference, Lancaster University, UK, 31 August – 2 September 2006.

2. The bigger part of this research remains purely descriptive, e.g.: Breunig 1987; Engstrom 1992; Breunig 1996; Orgeret & Ronning 2002; Ronning & Orgeret 2006. We think it more appropriate, though, to open up this research conditioned by the traditional communications concepts, methodologies and paradigms. To make sense of UNESCO's policies and visions on communication, it is essential that we try to go beyond established disciplinary boundaries.

3. According to Preston, when examining the worldwide rise of information society policy initiatives it is not enough to stress the US government's successfulness in its (economically motivated) exporting of the information society idea. A thorough analysis of the prominence of information society initiatives in policy circles should also address political and economic changes at the national and regional level. As such, it must be recognised that the information society initiatives are built upon a convergence of interests between the powerful ICT industry and important industrial users on the one hand and "the narrowly economistic orientations and productivist values of the neo-liberal political elites on the other hand" (2001, 73-75).

4. Geneva Plan of Action, Geneva Declaration of Principles, Tunis Agenda for the Information Society and Tunis Commitment.

5. As such, the endeavour of this article can be thought of as an examination of the discursive context within which those public private partnerships take place. Partnerships between different "stakeholders" are very much propagated in the knowledge-based economy discourse, especially in the so-called Triple Helix partnerships between the university, the industry and government (see e.g.: Cooke & Leydesdorff 2006, 10). Both papers are complementary then, in the sense that there is always a "dialectic of discursivity and materiality" (Jessop 2004, 9).

6. ICT are moreover merely conceptualised as tools, there is no mentioning whatsoever that ICT are also commodities which are essential to the huge commercial interests of ICT corporations and which play a central role in the global trade regime by providing the infrastructural backbone for market transactions.

7. It is interesting to note that the modernisation paradigm similarly focused on the same crucial need to upgrade skills in order to improve human resources (Melkote & Steeves 2001, 76).

8. In the case of *Towards Knowledge Societies* lacking any reference to the state's social policies (except maybe as regards education, but then again the inevitable need to work together with the private sector to provide education is enunciated) one could argue that it is not the task of this report to provide room for discussion regarding this issue. Contra this, one can say that a report with the ambition to provide a model for future societies correcting the narrow foci of the concepts of information society and knowledge-based economy but actually neglecting social policy is making a very important omission, to say the least.

9. The United Kingdom rejoined UNESCO in 1997, the United States rejoined UNESCO in 2003.

10. In the case of communication the New Communication Strategy was adopted, which "reinstated" the free flow of information at the heart of UNESCO's communication policies. As UNESCO's constitution actually leaves a lot of room for interpretation (Kittel 1997, 70-75, 93), a "return" to the constitution is an awkward expression, for it is rather the case that one interpretation is preferred over others.

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