

The City of Knowledge:
Knowledge as the Currency of Modernity in Panama

Introduction

When the first uniformed police officer sat down at a table a few rows away from me, I was admittedly surprised by his presence. It was the first day of a free and public class offered through the non-profit City of Knowledge Foundation which manages a business park called the City of Knowledge () that sits on the shore of the Panama Canal a short distance from downtown Panama City, the nation's capital (Image 1). The City of Knowledge is host to myriad kinds of organizations: academic institutions, bioscience and information technology corporations, several United Nations offices, and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to name a few. I had been conducting ethnographic research on the social work of the concept of knowledge for three weeks and I would continue to carry out interviews, attend events, and do archival

Image 1. Map of the Canal Zone and the City of Knowledge

were made prevalent, reinforced, and contested during the rest of the week and during my encounters with Foundation representatives in Panama. For one, his and others' comments within the class and within the Foundation's managerial staff, all originally in Spanish, posited the existence of an always self-aware and rational citizen—with us, the audience, as his prime example. Anthropologists have complicated this picture with ethnographic research that suggests models like the instructor's—that simplify and sanitize notions of the citizen and the state—are in fact seeped in the politics of contested meaning making (Das and Poole 2004). It's precisely these politics—the unequal and dynamic practices of invoking voices to make claim to knowledge and modernity—that I will explore in this essay.

most advanced” (444). In practice, the need for and historical specificity of the interventionist state is deliberately hidden within the neoliberal double truth.

Mirowski’s notion of double truth is useful in understanding what is going on in the case of the City of Knowledge Foundation’s role in facilitating flow and processes of subject-making. Returning to the fully-uniformed police captains in the academic course, I argue that the police presence in the course exemplified the particular shape of the neoliberal double truth as advocated by City of Knowledge participants. Within the same breath as mentions to the free market as the best facilitator for alleviating the chronic poverty of much of the nation’s inhabitants, city officials and educational consultants claimed that agents of Panama’s political economy, such as the police, were absolutely necessary for eco-oriented so-called ‘market integration’ of rural communities. This is perhaps best exemplified by the process of the Foundation linking entrepreneurs with rural

to be improving towards an imagined natural and terminal equilibrium of the ecosystem, for example.

Having posed a question about the police presence in the classroom, one officer explained that the police stand with the City of Knowledge in an effort to make good decisions about environmental challenges that pose a threat to national security. The comment was at first puzzling, especially without any historical context or ethnographic description with which to situate contemporary relations between the

this contradiction is an increasingly great threat for the only part of the economy that is organized north to south; that is, the canal.”

Here, Rulfo posits a problem between the flow of traffic through the canal and the flow of trade through the rest of the country. The problem is also a problem of unequal distribution of resources within the economy since, he explained, the canal zone area and canal have been privileged above all else during the last hundred years. Rulfo marks the Torrijos-Carter treaty of 1977 as the moment when Panama took control of the canal’s watershed; the first, he claims, the state had ever actively managed.

Yet, Rulfo explained to me, by the time Panama took the helm of the canal, the country had no “water culture.” Rulfo claimed that even by 2017, the country lacked the necessary orientation to the management of its watersheds: “we don’t have a water culture, neither as a product nor an element. Our water culture consists of looking to the sky and hoping that it rains!” However, a type of water culture has necessarily emerged around the canal, Rulfo said, in large part because of its design. The canal’s elevated locks system requires the input of fresh water for the locks to function, making it completely dependent on the untold millions of gallons of freshwater that fall on isthmus’ mountains and flow to Gatun lake, which serves as the liquid backbone of the canal (Image 1). Rulfo explained that one aspect of his research, as an environmental historian, has been to consider the work and conditions required to transform water from a natural element into a natural resource. He argues that water flowing through the Chagres river transforms from a natural element into a natural resource as soon as it enters Gatun Lake.

Anthropologists have long dealt in the political currency of the culture/nature dichotomy (and the related human/non-human, mind/body, etc). They ask,

agents

of language,

Any tension involved in the interaction had to do with the subtle contestation over the nature of the participation frameworks we were each invoking. To Rulfo, I was a student asking for information that he, as an informant, possessed. And this was, in fact, part of my purpose for being in his office. To me, however, my presence was of a dual nature in that I was there to learn about the history of the space as well as engage Rulfo as a subject of my research. My North American accent and grammatical mistakes in speaking no doubt reinforced his expectation

structures” that could be linked to each transition, as seen below (personal communication).

Transition	Structure of Knowledge Management
Antiquity to Middle Ages	Classical Academy
Middle Ages to Modern Age	Benedictine Monastery
Modern Age to Current	The 19 th and 20 th Century University

Rulfo added: “I am interested in building some kind of hypothesis about knowledge management in the coming world, based on experiences like that of the City of Knowledge.” Based on Rulfo’s comments, we might yet add another line:

Transition	Structure of Knowledge Management
Current to Future	[City of Knowledge?]

The schematic segments time and, I argue, spatializes it. The project of spatializing time, anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues, was a hallmark of evolutionary anthropologists, such as Lewis H. Morgan, during the 19th and 20th centuries. This paradigmatic view affirmed notions of difference between the anthropologist and the subject of his or her ethnographic investigation in terms of distance, thereby naturalizing violently unequal power relations (Fabian 1983). In fact, Fabian posits, this effort by such anthropologists, “contributed above all to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise” (Fabian 1983, 17). Non-white people in distant places—“primitives”—were human just like us, the European/American narrative went, but represented a previous stage of evolutionary development of the species. Fabian’s critique of the foundational epistemological orientations of the discipline also involved demonstrating how “temporal concepts” such as “primitive,” are in fact not objective truths but categories of Western thought (Fabian 1983, 18). Put another way, historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that such narratives constitute the discursive category of the “savage slot,” which Trouillot argues represents the “symbolic organization upon which anthropological discourse is premised” (Trouillot 2003, 9).

Rulfo’s depiction of knowledge management, then, is a thoroughly Euro-centric one wherein a particular regime of time is assumed to be singular and universal. He vaguely depicts the tropes Fabian critiques, bringing me to wonder where (and when) different ways of knowing enter into his conceptualization. To Fabian’s question of “whether and how a body of knowledge is validated or invalidated by the use of temporal categorizations,” we might suggest that Rulfo validates his quest for a thesis on the changing role of knowledge management with reference to a teleology that leads to the present moment, which is encapsulated in the City of Knowledge.

Carr points out that anthropologists have demonstrated that “institutions’ ability to organize ways of knowing rests on their ability to manage ways of speaking by providing

argue that, contrary to how foundation participants narrativize the City of Knowledge as a neutral facilitator, the foundation attempts to shape the contours of 'knowledge' and access to it or its application such that the concept becomes the very substance and process by which to recognize Panama's entry to modernity. This process is made possible by the enforcement of specific knowledge-regimes in the countryside and within the City of Knowledge park. However, in this section and the next, I suggest that the technocratic

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