Reconfiguring research relevance – steps towards salvaging the radical potential of the co-productive turn in searching for sustainable solutions

HILDE REFSTIE

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In this lecture, I discuss the role of academia in addressing "fast policymaking" on sustainability. I suggest that the co-productive turn, whereby universities are increasingly expected to engage with a diverse set of actors, including citizens, can provide checks and balances to top-heavy bureaucracy, political elites, and market power in sustainability processes. However, if research relevance continues to be defined in neoliberal terms as meeting the needs of the economy and industry, this potential will not be realized. Drawing inspiration from the "slow research movement", the call for more reflexive co-production in sustainability science, decolonial scholarship, and alternative debates on research impact, I propose a critical reconfiguration of research relevance that would respond better to the multiple imperatives of research to be critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable. However, this reconfiguration would be contingent on active scholarly engagement with the politics that condition relevance. Drawing on my experiences from participating in a collective named New University Norway, I end the lecture by offering some thoughts about the 'new' university in co-producing sustainable solutions.

Keywords: fast policy, urban sustainability, knowledge co-production, action research

Hilde Refstie (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7772-4419), Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Department of Geography, NO-7491, Trondheim, Norway. E-mail: hilde.refstie@ntnu.no

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Introduction

> Our beautiful Earth is becoming inhospitable to us. How should educators, researchers, and knowledge creators respond to this existential threat? By accepting an unpalatable truth: our mainstream approach to learning, education, and research is actively co-producing the very opposite of what we need at this time of unsustainability.
>
> (Bradbury *et al*. 2019, 3)

We live in a time defined by climate change, biodiversity loss, social and economic inequalities, conflict, and, most recently, a global pandemic, which has accentuated the dire need for sustainable solutions. The topic for the Annual Meeting of Finnish Geographers 2021, "Searching for solutions: Geographers for the environment and people", for which this lecture was prepared, was therefore timely. We are now two years into the Decade of Action launched by the United Nations with the aim to deliver the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and we as researchers are urgently called upon to do our part (United Nations 2019).

In this lecture, I revisit what 'doing our part' means in a progressive world of fast policymaking. Fast policymaking refers to the accelerated rate of experimentation that concentrates on policy shortcuts that can inform effective and visible forms of political action (Peck 2002). While there is no doubt that the immediate concerns captured in the 2030 Agenda require an intensification of efforts, fast policymaking tends to favor "technocratic strategies pushed by well-resourced multilateral agencies" over more "organically grown, endogenous approaches to policy innovation" (Peck & Theodore 2015, xxxi, xxxii). This means that while solutions may be produced fast, they may not necessarily be just or sustainable. For example, Tahvilzadeh, Montin and Cullberg (2017) argue that in urban politics sustainability has become a hegemonic concept used to evade scrutiny and attract positive affections for any coalition of actors partaking in city development. In their study of the Gothenburg Metropolitan Area, they illustrate how the urban sustainability discourse functions as a tool to make the city region governable, so that infrastructural development and housing can be continued in line with what they describe as a "market-oriented, economic-growth-first rationale" (Tahvilzadeh *et al*. 2017, 66). More importantly, they show how the language of "co-production", despite its radical potential, ends up facilitating this kind of fast policymaking.

Co-production can generally be defined as the idea of involving multiple participants (researchers, policymakers, industry and private sector, civil society, and citizens) together in knowledge production and policymaking to develop new knowledge and new ways of integrating knowledge into decision-making and action, and hence new outcomes in the world (Miller & Wyborn 2020). Co-production is seen to "generate new knowledge, capacities, networks, social capital and joint action" and lead to "a more relevant, agile, inclusive, legitimate, impactful and innovative knowledge-action system" (Schneider *et al*. 2021, 128). However, co-production can also function as "washing", whereby processes are portrayed and marketed as being inclusive while at the same time enabling business as usual to continue (Cooke & Kothari 2001).

The 2030 Agenda has been promoted as enabling win-win scenarios in which commercial and public interests align to achieve the SDGs (United Nations 2015). This partnership approach has been an overall goal of the SDG framework from the start, but limited attention has been paid to how power dynamics work in the different spaces of co-production promoted through the framework and what policy processes they enable or disable (Wilson 2015). With blue becoming "greener than green" (Sundar & Kellaris 2016, 64), the association with the UN flag and the 2030 Agenda has given actors opportunities to market themselves as social and environmental entrepreneurs (Macellari *et al*. 2021). This in turn has given rise to debates on "SDG washing" – as flagged by Roel Nieuwenkamp, the former chair of the OECD Working Party on Responsible Business Conduct – whereby actors "use the

Sustainable Development Goals to market their positive contribution to some SDGs while ignoring the negative impact on others" (Nieuwenkamp 2017). The appropriation of discourse to mobilize power and alliances along the lines of existing interests and hierarchies are not new in urban development. However, fast policymaking that speaks to the urgency of sustainability challenges and assumes legitimacy from being co-produced is particularly difficult to question. Cox and Bèland (2013) attribute the potency of sustainability as a marketing concept to its "valence", defined as the emotional quality of an idea that makes it more, or less, attractive. They argue that policy entrepreneurs make use of ideas with high valence to frame policy issues and generate support for their policy proposals. It is thus relevant to consider how the coupling of sustainability and co-production – both very valent ideas – impact and is impacted by fast policymaking.

In this lecture, I draw on secondary literature, my own observations, and 25 interviews[1] with researchers and policymakers in Norway engaged in different urban sustainability partnerships, to illustrate how sustainability – especially when coupled with 'co-production' and 'citizen participation' – can serve as a vehicular idea that promotes fast policymaking (McLennan 2004; Peck & Theodore 2010; Temenos & McCann 2012). I argue that the "co-productive turn" in research and policy (Bell & Pahl 2018) has changed the landscape of fast policymaking and therefore more discussion is needed on the different roles that knowledge-producing actors play in co-productive spaces (Temenos & Baker 2015; Flinders *et al*. 2016). To start this discussion, I draw inspiration from the "slow research" movement (Mountz *et al*. 2015), the call for more reflexive co-production in sustainability science (Wyborn *et al*. 2019; Turnhout *et al*. 2020), decolonial scholarship (Noxolo 2017; Sultana 2019), and alternative debates on research impact (Pain *et al*. 2011) to argue for a critical reconfiguration of research relevance that responds better to the multiple imperatives of research to be critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable (Refstie 2018). However, this reconfiguration is contingent on active scholarly engagement with "the politics that condition relevance" (Staeheli & Mitchell 2008). Drawing on my experiences from participating in a collective named New University Norway I therefore end the lecture by offering some thoughts for the 'new university' in co-producing sustainable solutions.

Co-producing the smart sustainable city

Sustainability transitions are generally multi-actor processes characterized by a host of "wicked problems"[2] (Polk 2015). Therefore, they require cross-sectoral approaches and collaborations, both to address complexity and to ensure that solutions are accepted by the wider public (Frantzeskaki & Rok 2018). As a result, co-production has become a cornerstone of research and policymaking on sustainability, commonly highlighted in five broad and interconnected ways: (1) as a tool for advancing new innovative knowledge and design (Lund 2018); (2) as a way to increase policy uptake within the general population (Wyborn *et al*. 2019); (3) as a normative goal in terms of governance (*ibid*.), (4) as an analytical lens through which to gain a better understanding of the ways in which science-policy interactions are always ongoing co-productions (Jasanoff 2004); and (5) as a general means to increase research relevance (Dilling & Lemos 2011).

In urban planning and governance, the concepts of sustainability and co-production have received a distinct place. Given rapid global urbanization and the concentration of people and activities in cities, the sustainability agenda has been actively taken up by cities across the world. Together with the push for more inclusive cities this has resulted in multi-stakeholder collaborations in the form of city forums, participatory planning studios, citizen panels and committees, and urban living labs, to mention some (Bulkeley *et al*. 2019). Many of these initiatives have been formed under the heading of 'smart cities', as 'smartness' has been heavily emphasized in urban policy and research as a tool to achieve sustainability. While smartness is a different and possibly more instrumental concept compared with 'sustainability' (Ahvenniemi *et al*. 2017), both concepts form part of what Söderström, Paasche and Klauser (2014) describe as contemporary language games in urban management and development; where experts, marketing specialists, consultants, corporations, and city officials frame how cities are understood, conceptualized, and planned. Thus, many of the co-production dynamics explored in smart cities are relevant when discussing urban

sustainability, especially as several of the actors remain the same and the concepts are being stretched to connect (Karvonen *et al*. 2019).

Smart city strategies provide market opportunities that attract a wide variety of stakeholders and interests. However, prioritizations of investments – the core of public politics – tend to be framed as a technical matter of promoting market-led solutions and technological upgrades (Cardullo & Kitchin 2019). Therefore, urban smartness in sustainable development discourse has been criticized for constituting yet another tool for capital and profit; a tool enabled by the notion of a value-free, impartial sustainability that can be achieved with the citizens, the state, and the private market working together in various partnerships and constellations (Swyngedouw 2007; Parr 2009). It follows that it is important to not just explore and analyze what discourses on co-producing smartness and sustainability *say*, but also to interrogate critically what they *do* (Tahvilzadeh *et al*. 2017).

In their study of smart sustainable city initiatives in three Norwegian cities, namely Trondheim, Bergen and Bodø, Gohari and colleagues (2020a) argue that it is crucial to consider whose interests are being advanced in collaborations on smartness and sustainability. They contend that identification of different interests and goals are challenging at the local level, where governance systems are more informal. In addition, citizens are often involved more as 'learners' and 'testers' than as active agents. Therefore, the top-down narratives pushed by EU policy objectives and funding frameworks are rarely challenged in smart sustainable city processes (Gohari *et al*. 2020b). Instead, citizen engagement remains cosmetic and limited by political and industrial visions of what is profitable for private and municipal actors. Cardullo and Kitchin (2019, 36) go even further, and describe the use of citizen participation in smart city making as a rebranding to "silence detractors or bring them into the fold while keeping the central mission of capital accumulation and technocratic governance intact". They argue that while many attempts are made to promote the smart city as "citizen focused [...] smart urbanism remains rooted in pragmatic, instrumental and paternalistic discourses and practices rather than those of social rights, political citizenship, and the common good" (Cardullo & Kitchin 2018, 1).

As exemplified above, there is no shortfall in literature pointing out how discourses of both smart and sustainable development are used to further the interests of entrepreneurial actors supported by the state (Gunder 2006). However, the critique seldom makes inroads into policymaking processes in which knowledge co-production is used to ensure research relevance and impact on sustainability issues. As stated by Tahvilzadeh, Montin and Cullberg (2017, 80) with reference to their Gothenburg study: "While critical voices investigate what sustainability is, could or should be, they are detached from the workshops where the actual investment decisions are being made, and the reports, though published, are politely recognized and conveniently hidden in bookcases".

Following this reflection and similar observations of urban sustainability work made over the years, my colleague Hilde Nymoen Rørtveit and I decided to design a research project that explored how researchers in Norway reflect on their role in combatting what Gunder (2006, 209) describes as "promarket interpretations of sustainable development that water down the concept of sustainability to literally that of business as usual, with, at best, an objective to partially reduce urban-consumer energy consumption and waste outputs while still maximizing the potential for all embracing economic growth with little regard to overall resource depletion." In our project, we wanted to explore to what extent the discussion raised by Gunder (2006) is relevant in the Norwegian context; whether researchers can be expected to challenge greenwashing, bluewashing, SDG washing and participation washing in sustainability collaborations, and, if so, how well-placed researchers are within current university incentive and performance structures to do so.

In addition to observations at various events and project meetings, we conducted 25 interviews with researchers and municipal workers engaged in different urban sustainability partnerships in Norway, with the help of our colleague Leika Aruga. In the interviews, we asked the participants to reflect on how their projects had been initiated and developed, how partners were brought on-board, what discussions had taken place in the collaborations on potential diverging interests and views on sustainability, and what they considered the role of researchers to be in the different partnerships and projects. The findings were also discussed at a university webinar, with several researchers engaged in sustainability co-production collaborations present.

Balancing multiple imperatives of research in co-producing smart sustainable cities in Norway

In Norway, the popular use of the SDGs is extremely visible and there is high competition between cities in terms of taking up the 2030 agenda (Andersen & Røe 2016). The capital city, Oslo, which has visions of a green city securing a sustainable future for all, was appointed the European Green Capital for 2019 by the European Commission. Tromsø in the north is using the slogan of a "sustainable travel destination" to attract tourists. Bergen in the southwest hosts an annual national SDG conference, and Ålesund, farther north on the southwest coast, has developed a Futurelab as part of the UN's implementation program for smart and sustainable societies. Trondheim, where I am based, has declared itself as 'taking the lead' in promoting sustainable cities in Norway through its involvement in the UN SDG Cities (SDGC) Leadership Platform, which was created in Davos, Switzerland, in 2018 (Karlsen 2018). The latter includes the establishment of a Geneva UN Charter Centre of Excellence in Trondheim, as well as wider collaboration between cities in Norway and globally that puts 'the sustainable city' front and center in the urban development discourse. Sustainable urban development has in this way become part of the competition between cities to make their marks on national as well as global agendas.

The many urban sustainability initiatives with co-productive elements in Norway have led to a host of researchers collaborating in different ways with municipalities, industry, and civil society. This forms part of the co-productive turn where universities are increasingly expected to engage with industry, national and local authorities, and citizens, in order to stimulate development and drive societal impact (Bell & Pahl 2018). For many universities the 2030 agenda has become the umbrella for the co-productive turn, as is visible in university strategies, of which many build actively on the Sustainable Development Goals. Projects and strategies therefore refer to and position themselves according to different SDGs.

It is difficult to see the inclusion of the SDGs in various collaborations, visions, and strategies as anything other than a positive development. Similarly, the partnership approach to sustainable development, together with the emphasis on co-production of knowledge and solutions, may open for a plurality of voices in research, policy, and decision-making. However, development history has shown us that participatory approaches are easily manipulated and can function as a "tyranny" (Cooke & Kothari 2001). They can mask interest conflicts and force consensus, while receiving legitimacy through the very same processes. The workings of power in co-productive spaces must therefore be continuously interrogated. This interrogation did, however, rarely take place in the collaborations looked at in the study. As put by one of the researchers interviewed "I do not think we are used to talking about power relations [...] Everyone thinks and behaves like we have the same power, but in reality, it is not so [...] We need to have a conversation about the different roles [of actors in sustainability collaborations]" (Interview, researcher 4). This pertains not the least to the role of universities, research institutions, and individual researchers in such partnerships.[3]

Scandinavian universities were long seen as a stronghold for university autonomy, given the historically firm support for government-funded basic research. However, research has become increasingly commercialized and innovation driven (Tjora 2019). Universities compete with other research institutions for funding, and new partnerships are formed under the heading of co-production that blur the lines between basic research, applied research, and contract research. New Public Management has also steadily made its inroad into the sector, and research priorities are increasingly set with reference to national strategies (Hjelseth 2019; Åmossa 2021). In order to compete for external research funding, research has to respond to a number of preset criteria and tick the right boxes. This has given rise to critical conversations about the diminishing space for universities to fulfill one of their key missions: to challenge prevailing orthodoxies and enlarge the democratic sphere for the benefit of the wider public (Giroux 2005).[4]

The interviewees in our study did not seem too worried about hard state censorship or full privatization of research funding imposing limitations on the space for critical conversation in projects. Instead, what emerged in different forms was how formation of partnerships and research was seen to be 'nudged' in certain directions. Nudging refers to a form of "soft paternalism" that

steers people in certain directions without taking away their full choice (Thaler & Sunstein 2008). Developed in behavioral economics, the term describes a form of influence through positive reinforcements and indirect suggestions. In the academic context, and in our study, the concept is useful to understand how research priorities are nudged in specific directions through funding incentives, partnership preferences, and performance indicators, put in place by an increasingly top-down and externally governed university sector.

The researchers interviewed in our study considered themselves as being relatively free in terms of choosing which collaborations they entered into or were part of, and how they expressed themselves in those collaborations. However, when tracing the origins of their project collaborations, most researchers acknowledged that funding structures and strategic directions coming from funding agencies and university management impacted heavily on what projects and collaborations took place. As stated by one of the interviewees: "The goals set [for a research project] are not based on identified problems. The goals are based on how you can access funding" (Interview, researcher 5). This also impacted the framing of sustainable solutions. One researcher reflected on how research priorities were formed in a large collaboration on sustainable energy that involved electricity providers. The researcher pointed out how only certain types of solutions were put on the table and that these were taken for granted throughout the project. In the interview, the researcher reflected "Why is the transition about … making more smart homes or making the electricity more flexible and why don't we just use less? Because there is no money in it. So, sustainability is in a way also part of the market in this sense" (Interview, researcher 1).

For many institutions and organizations, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals framework seems to offer a way out of the tensions between private and public interests in research. However, as the above quote illustrates, there is an inclination towards prioritizing green-growth oriented strategies over, for example, reduction in consumption in for-profit collaborations (Luke 2013). The three-legged conceptualization of environmental, social, and economic sustainability in the 2030 agenda is also operationalized in competing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are open for interpretation and trade-offs (Menton *et al*. 2019). One of the interviewees described sustainability as having become the following:

> a huge, fuzzy concept and that is the problem with sustainability, it can be mobilized for anything. It's a very, very, very popular term to label plans with and specific developments as well. Because it's so positive a term and a positive concept, it is largely, mostly misused, as well. So, everything and anything is labeled, like sustainable, or picked out, like one goal here and a subgoal there (Interview, researcher 3).

The SDGs are framed as something that most people can support, and while the interrelated nature of the goals is stressed, the framework opens for possible cherry picking, thus making it adaptable to a host of agendas (Forestier & Kim 2020). To safeguard some of the radical potential that lies in connecting environmental and social justice under the heading of sustainable development in co-produced research and policy, it is therefore crucial with ongoing inquiry into *who* owns and defines the research and policy problem – or on *whose behalf* solutions are being sought. Discussions on co-production is therefore highly interlinked with discussions on how research relevance is sought *and for whom* (Harvey 1974).

Reconfiguring research relevance in the search for sustainable solutions – care and responsibilities

Relevance commonly refers to "the quality or state of being closely connected or appropriate" (Lexico n.d.). It reflects "the degree to which something is related or useful to what is happening or being talked about" (Cambridge Dictionary 2021). The term relevance is also closely linked to notions of 'impact', of having a "marked effect or influence" on matters at hand (Lexico n.d.). As the 2030 Agenda represents some of the most pressing issues of our time, it is not surprising that research relevance is increasingly defined as responding to sustainable development challenges. Geography as a discipline has largely responded to the call for producing policy-relevant research that engages with

the 'real world', as was much of the debate in the early 2000s (Castree 2002; Dorling & Shaw 2002; Ward 2005). However, the discussion on whom our research is to be relevant *for* is particularly pertinent with reference to the co-productive turn. For example, Bakewell (2008) warns against the conflation of 'policy' and 'practical' research relevance. In his call for more "policy irrelevant" research on forced migration, he makes the following argument:

> [Researchers] tend to take the categories, concepts and priorities of policy makers and practitioners as their initial frame of reference for identifying their areas of study and formulating research questions. This privileges the worldview of the policy makers in constructing the research, constraining the questions asked, the objects of study and the methodologies and analysis adopted. (Bakewell 2008, 432)

Participatory action research (PAR) has been promoted as one way of ensuring that research moves beyond the interest of policymakers (Pain *et al*. 2011). PAR outlines an ethics of engagement with people affected by policy. It aims to develop comprehensive knowledge of a situation, but also to support people's capacity for organized and collective action. Envisioned as a bottom-up project, the most emancipatory forms of PAR represent a decolonizing strategy of particular relevance for communities whose voices have been silenced, excluded, obscured, or otherwise censored in dominant discourses (Tuck 2009). At the same time, PAR has become a stretched concept that covers several different approaches. Action-oriented research methodologies have been mainstreamed in co-production efforts and much action research now takes the form of university-public-private partnerships in which priorities are largely set by policymaking actors. This trend is further reinforced by the ways in which research projects are increasingly application-based and co-produced in line with strategies set by different governmental and private funders.

A similar trajectory can be observed with citizen science, a strand of participation-oriented research that places specific emphasis on people's capacity to engage in science (Bonney *et al*. 2009). Partnerships range from more conventional scientist-driven research projects that include community engagement, to crowdsourcing through networks focused on data collection, and to research driven by groups of citizens responding to community needs. While citizen science (as indicated by the name) has potential in terms of recentering the public in research, it is riddled with many of the same dilemmas as action research in terms of how societal inequalities continue to shape representation and modes of participation in projects (Soleri *et al*. 2016). As citizen science is mainstreamed, it may thus become submerged in the same co-production dynamics that are present in fast policymaking and where *fast research* becomes a component.

Our interviewees did not conclude whether the processes they had been part of, and were still part of, could be considered fast research or fast policymaking. Yet their reflections highlighted the importance of analyzing co-productive spaces with a particular eye on discursive and microdynamics of power present both within and outside such spaces. This is of particular importance in participatory spaces, as the very search for consensus-based solutions can make conflicting interests harder to identify and trace (Pløger 2018). One of the interviewed municipal officials, when discussing the role of the university in sustainability collaborations, raised the following question: "Where is the line between being a research institution and a consulting company? (...) There are many dilemmas. I generally think the level of conflict is too low. There are far too many who get away with too much without being challenged on basic assumptions" (Interview, municipal worker 4). In the interview, the official called for a more critical engagement from the academe, referring to university-city-industry collaborations on sustainability.

Research in the co-productive turn is expected to respond to multiple imperatives of being critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable. It should be able to explain phenomena, lead to impact, be anchored with stakeholders, while at the same time explore, expose, and question hegemony and traditional assumptions about power in the pursuit of social change (Refstie 2018). Balancing these multiple imperatives for research are challenging at the best of times, but in a system where fast research is incentivized it can be backbreaking. Prospects for innovation with impacts that can be identified ahead of research projects have become an important requirement for research funding from governments, private actors, or regional bodies such as the European Union. Research also operates on an increasingly project-based manner with tight time frames. Lastly, the precarious work

environment for many young scholars can make it difficult to raise critical voices against the very partnerships that secures their temporary employments. Together these developments pose significant challenges to realizing the radical potential inherent in co-production of research and policy for sustainable solutions. The question is whether these challenges can be overcome.

Lewis and Hogan (2016, 1) argue that fast research leads to "the over-simplification of policy into easy to implement solutions, which constrains the possibilities for reform, and denies local alternatives to be imagined and practiced." They conclude that "in spite of the seemingly obvious alignment between fast policies and a fast social world, there are clear policy benefits to be had from 'making haste slowly'" (Lewis & Hogan 2016, 15). According to Benoit-Antoine Bacon, former Dean of Arts and Science at Bishop's University in Canada, some researchers solve the tension between the fast-paced, metric-oriented university, and the need for slow scholarship by adopting a two-speed research approach: "One safer and more 'productive' stream that guarantees renewal of research funding and in parallel, a slower, more thoughtful, quality-focused approach where they can do their best work over long periods of time" (cited in McCabe, 2012). However, as pointed out by Shahjahan (2014), this individual response becomes a problem when fast research ends up colonizing the limited research time of scholars.

Accordingly, Mountz and colleagues (2015) explore slow scholarship and collective action informed by feminist politics as an alternative to the fast-moving neoliberal university. They describe the neoliberal university as an institution where logics, techniques, principles, and values from the sphere of commerce – such as competition, privatization, efficiency, and self-reliance – are applied to the university to instill productivity and excellence. The authors suggest that slowing down in the neoliberal university is not about speed *per se*, but about developing the space to address structures of power and inequality. This is essential in sustainability debates, where depoliticization dynamics in co-production are being pointed to as reinforcing rather than mitigating unequal power relations, and thereby preventing wider societal change from taking place (Turnhout *et al*. 2019). Inspired by Lawson's call for a caring geography as a radical project (Lawson 2009), Mountz and colleagues argue for a remaking of universities through "ethics of care" and pose the following question:

> What if we accounted for planning and engagement, for following through rather than moving on? Care – full scholarship is also about engaging different publics (not least our own research subjects), refining or even rejecting earlier ideas, engaging in activism and advocacy, and generally amplifying the potential impact of our scholarship rather than moving on to the next product that "counts" to administrators. (Mountz *et al*. 2015, 1245)

As they emphasize, slow scholarship is contingent on having space "to stop, reflect, reject, resist, subvert, and collaborate to cultivate different, more reflexive academic cultures" (Mountz *et al*. 2015, 1249). Care-full scholarship is therefore crucial to move towards more transformative research that addresses inequalities and root causes over symptoms. However, revealing the causality between the actions of groups of relatively privileged people and the suffering of the majority world and the environment does not necessarily lead to a greater sense of political responsibility (Raghuram *et al*. 2009). Researchers therefore need to "critically engage with the production of knowledge for sustainability through more action-oriented transformations research" (Bradbury *et al*. 2019, 4). This includes holding institutions to account. As stated by Sultana (2018, 186):

> If we want emancipatory politics and transformations in development, we need to challenge and improve what is done in the name of SDGs, keeping central the issues of social justice and ethical engagement. This is perhaps the most critical thing geographers can undertake going forward in order to dismantle the master's current house.

Even though co-production is one of the most important ideas in the theory and practice of knowledge and governance for global sustainability, systematic engagement with the role of power and politics in shaping processes and outcomes for sustainability has been lacking in the sustainability co-production literature (Turnout *et al*. 2019; Miller & Wyborn 2020). Here much can be learnt from post and decolonial scholarship where the mainstreaming of collaborative and participatory action-oriented research, together with local and global power asymmetries, have been at the center of debate for decades (Roy 2015). A recentering of historical and relational power dynamics can help

studies and work on sustainability co-production better interrogate how "In a world of staggering, and increasing, inequality, the very words 'our common future' can serve as cover for evading responsibility, through business as usual, and by failing to address the maldistribution of wealth and power that got us to the mess we are in" (Jasanoff 2018, 12). Moreover, it can provide as called for by Sultana (2018) a basis for an(Other) geographical critique of development and the SDGs, that expands the role of public intellectuals in holding institutions and people to account.

A reconfiguration of research relevance, and how research relevance is practiced as described above, requires the carving out of new spaces for scholarly engagement on the role of universities as well as university researchers, in the co-production of knowledge and policy. In a time where competing claims to the university is taking place, this is a many-faceted discussion that requires interrogation of how "complex relationships built upon contract rather than collegiality and aimed at profit generation rather than knowledge for its own sake or public service enfold public universities into the field of commerce" (Ball 2012, 24). It also involves discussions on how to create more equitable research partnerships and collaborations across global divisions (Noxolo 2017). This includes changes in the practices and systems of research funding, publishing, peer review, and knowledge infrastructures that currently promote global divisions of labor (Jazeel 2016). Discussions on (re)searching for sustainable solutions can therefore not be divorced from discussions of the systems that guides them.

Struggles for remaking the university

In an environment of economic efficiency and intensifying competition, the space for critical reflexivity and scholarly mobilization is experienced by many as shrinking (Berg *et al*. 2016). This pertains in particular to young scholars who are often at the receiving end of some of the most brutal consequences of the neoliberal university in terms of job insecurity and intense pressure to perform according to narrowly set indicators on research quality (Riding *et al*. 2019). In our study, interviewees who held temporary positions at the university brought their status up as a hindrance for engaging more critically with discussions on the research collaborations their work were situated within. This points to how particular attention must be paid to different positionalities, and how they intersect to influence who can speak up or not, in debates on knowledge co-production and fast policymaking. As written by Lorne (2021) in his commentary on researching, mobilizing and critiquing public policy, researching fast policy is

> …increasingly at odds with the intense pressures of city halls, governmental departments and universities seeking the latest policy solutions yesterday (Kuus 2015). And the pressure of time can weigh heavily upon fast policy researchers. It is hard to be future-orientated in your outlook – counter to Jessop's (2011) romantic public irony – if you've got three months left on your work contract. (Lorne 2021, 6)

The above pertains not the least to scholars located outside of the Geography discipline's EuroAmerican core, who might experience precarious work environments *combined* with global structural academic marginalization (Jazeel 2016; Schmidt & Neuburger 2017). However, in such pressed situations, new spaces for activism are also carved out. This is noticeable from movements such as the 'pink tide' in Latin America, the 'Arab Spring', and the 'umbrella revolution' in China that included students and staff mobilizing for critical independent academia and the university as a counterforce to authoritarian regimes (Roberts 2015). It is also visible with young activist researcher collectives being developed such as Scientist Rebellion, Concerned Scientists and many more.[5] Lastly, it has been prominent in calls in recent years for a "new university" that can provide a counterweight to commodification of education and research across Europe (van Reekum 2015).

The university sector has seen many reforms in past decades, and much has been written about the ways in which marketization, corporatization, commercialization, and financialization have changed the ways research and education are done (Slaughter & Rhoades 2000; Radice 2013). In 2015, some of these discussions gained new momentum in Europe when Dutch students, for the first time since 1968, kicked open the doors of the historic administrative center, Maagdenhuis, at the University of Amsterdam. The dissent marked the start of a six-week sit-in protest against the marketization of universities (van Reekum 2015). Similar protests took place in Utrecht, London,

Leeds, Toronto, Tirana, and Helsinki (Ratcliffe 2015). In Lund, Gothenburg, Uppsala, and Stockholm thousands of students gathered in 2013 under the banner "Universities are not for sale" (Arbetaren 2013). In Roskilde, Århus, and Copenhagen students blocked the offices of university staff to protest against the government's higher education policies (Monsen 2013; Sommer 2015). The attention the protests received led to talk of an "academic spring" across Europe, where marketization of universities was put on the agenda by students and staff (Risager & Thorup 2016).

The waves from the protests also reached NTNU (Trondheim), where a group of young scholars, including myself, had begun to mobilize against top-down mergers and policies that worked to instill an entrepreneurial and commercial logic in research and education at our university. In formulating our critique, we likened protesting neoliberal reforms in Norwegian universities to "fighting fog", meaning how it was difficult for us as young scholars to navigate a landscape where the problem was more about the questions never posed, the articles never written, and the collaborations never formed than about any absolute restrictions on academic freedom (Andresen *et al*. 2015). To "fight fog" requires a level of reflection that we as scholars seldom have time and space to achieve (Riding *et al*. 2019). Because answering questions about what we do, and do not do, as an academic collective requires us, as called for by Staeheli and Mitchell (2008, 357), to frame the search for research relevance "within explicit discussions of either the politics of relevance or of the social practices that condition relevance" inside and outside of our universities.

To do this, I have argued in this lecture, much can be learned from the slow scholarship movement (Mountz *et al*. 2015), the calls for more reflexive co-production in sustainability science (Wyborn *et al*. 2019; Turnhout *et al*. 2020), postcolonial and decolonial research (Noxolo 2017; Sultana 2019) and alternative thinking on research impacts from engaged scholarship (Bradbury *et al*. 2019). What these have in common are thorough reflections and discussions on ways in which to balance the multiple imperatives of research to be rooted, critical, explanatory, and actionable (Refstie 2018). While being far from a straightforward task, and one that I invite commentaries following this lecture to help unpack, more reflexive scholarship can help to mitigate the bias in research that favors the worldview of policymakers and "the ruling classes of the corporate state" (Harvey 1974, 23). It can also work to address the "geographies of Geography", which includes "the structural partiality, inequality and EuroAmericanism of the community mobilized by such phrases as 'our discipline'" (Jazeel 2016, 650). This is necessary to raise a critique that challenges depoliticization dynamics in co-production on sustainability (Turnhout *et al*. 2020) and to facilitate transitions from "assessing sustainability problems to identifying and deploying effective sustainability solutions" (Miller & Wyborn 2020, 88).

Nevertheless, and as emphasized by many of the abovementioned scholars, reflexivity is not enough if the goal is to prevent fast policymaking and sustainability fixes. Transformation requires scholarly engagements with the structures that guide research in the entrepreneurial university. Therefore, scholarly activist spaces become very important for expanding the role of public intellectuals to hold institutions to account. In this work, much can be learnt from connecting different activist spaces, and engaging with the politics governing research relevance from decolonial perspectives. As argued by Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo (2009), learning from, and engaging with, anti-colonialist struggles has the potential to charge scholarly responsibility and care "with emotions such as anger, anticipation and hope that make responsibility not a burden but forward-looking: it contains 'alternative visions, alternative understandings of how the world could be better'" (Gilmartin & Berg 2007, 120). In such a way, different forms of "thirdspaces", as places of resistance and transformation inspiring researcher activist collectives, can be a platform from where to co-produce the world (hooks 1990).

Conclusions

Similar to the description provided by Dear (1999, 144) over twenty years ago, there are currently several social, economic, and environmental dynamics at play that have created a contemporary "relevance renaissance". Socioeconomic inequalities, the increasing recognition of our planet's environmental boundaries, polarization of world politics, conflict, and the global COVID-19 pandemic have instilled a sense of urgency and put pressure on research to contribute to immediate policy and practical solutions. To achieve this, co-production has been highlighted as crucial, reviving longstanding

debates on power, participation, and the structure of the knowledge economy. As the landscape for fast policymaking is changing, more discussion is needed on the different roles actors play in co-productive spaces and how power in co-production influence understandings of research relevance. As have been pointed out in this lecture, there are many pitfalls to be observed when co-production is used as a tool to ensure research relevance. One is the risk to accept uncritically the priorities set by decision-makers who operate within political and economic constraints that favor clientelist politics and short-time frames (e.g., election cycles or time-sensitive profit maximation). Another pitfall is to adopt existing policy categories and concepts without questioning their underlying assumptions or the purpose for which they have been developed. A third is to contribute to fast policymaking that constructs simplified and definitive solutions, which in turn serve already well-capacitated actors. A fourth is to contribute yet again to the limitations and injustice resulting from centering Euro-American thought in academic knowledge co-production. Without more critical reflection and renewed discussion on how power works in co-productive spaces, sustainability researchers risk contributing to all four pitfalls, thereby paving the way for continued implementation of unjust sustainability fixes.

Fast policymaking on sustainability enabled in spaces of co-production is deeply problematic, not only because of its unjust effects, but also because it "stifles the potential for substantive social and environmental change" (Gunder 2006, 208). At the same time, co-production holds the potential to challenge fast policymaking, given the right conditions. Some of these conditions are outlined in the critical action research literature and in methodological reflections on participation and co-production prevalent in critical, feminist, post-colonial and decolonial studies. As argued by Sultana (2019, 25), "asking probing questions, such as who created this knowledge, what assumptions does it rely on, what does deconstructing its façade reveal, who is speaking for whom, and so on is an integral part of fighting social and environmental injustices". For this reason, I have argued in this lecture for a critical reconfiguration of research relevance, coupled with scholarly activism to enable research to better respond to the multiple imperatives of research to be critical, rooted, explanatory and actionable (Refstie 2018). This is not a revolutionary proposition, but one that needs continuous highlighting. Otherwise, we risk repeating the failures referred to by Francis (2001) when describing the ways in which the World Bank embraced participatory methodologies in the late 1990s. He argued that researchers had become colluders "in the manufacture of a collective dream of participation and community, behind the screen of which the levers of business remain quite intact" (Francis 2001, 87). That kind of fast researcg and policymaking is, ironically, something we simply do not have time for.

Notes

[1] Interviews, observations, and text analysis were conducted as part of the ongoing research project "Co-producing smart sustainable cities – the role of knowledge production in fast policymaking" at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU).

[2] A "wicked problem" is one that results from multiple contingent and conflicting issues and that to a large extent depends on the perspective from which an answer to the question is solicited (Polk 2015).

[3] It should be noted that universities, research institutions, and individual researchers by no means represent homogenous units. This is particularly relevant to consider in a time with deepening tensions and struggles over 'the university' and conflicting claims to it by managers and researchers (Pain *et al*. 2011).

[4] See, for example, Andresen and colleagues (2015), Jones (2017), Riding and colleagues (2019), and Tjora (2019) for some critical discussions on the neoliberal university in the Scandinavian context.

[5] Scientist Rebellion and The Norwegian chapter of Concerned Scientists

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