

Whither Epistemic Justice?

The Case for SWAFs Initiatives, or How to Make the Concept of Epistemic Justice Concrete and Actionable?

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Science and philosophy simply copied the institutional paths already taken by Western religion and mystified themselves so that one of the maxims of recent Western civilization has been to declare something to be « academic » — meaning that intelligent solutions to problems are in fact illusory because they are devised by people sheltered from the realities of daily life.

Vine Deloria¹

Managing a population is [...] not only a process through which regulatory power produces a set of subjects. It is also the process of their de-subjection, one with enormous political and legal consequences

Judith Butler²

As an alliance of reform-minded universities, ERUA has set out to develop its own engagement strategy around fundamental core values to guide our relations with civil society. Given the diversity of epistemological, cultural, and economic contexts, a one-size-fits-all solution certainly does not seem to be the appropriate response to what appears to be an ethical issue based on the dual question of access to and production of knowledge. What's more, the title of this workshop does not only point to a spatial location to be reached, but should also be considered in its temporal dimension, which may not only be teleological, as we question the way epistemic rights have been produced as critical frameworks of thought, which may not reflect the same expectations from one university to another. For example, the notion of innovation understood as unbridled technological progress may seem quite seductive to some, as exemplified by the transhumanist trends championed by prominent scholars around the world, especially with the current hype around AI-driven "empowering" solutions that may seem to lead to an endless and effortless production of knowledge. Is this really what we can define as social innovation? To what extent can such blackboxing processes accommodate epistemic justice, especially as our data-driven information age challenges the very notion of truth?

There can be no humanity without technology, starting with our command of language and writing as primary techniques. The question is not one of returning to a pastoral ideal, a movement that could be reformulated in Derrida's terms as a kind of autoimmune reaction against the techno-scientific abstraction that tears us away from what would be a living, unharmed spontaneity, the spontaneity of an ideal form of life emancipated from the machine. Rather, what we need to think out is a relationship to the world that is no longer reduced to pure instrumentalization, so much so that we ourselves end up being acted upon by technology that has become autonomous, to the detriment of our ability to act on the world with a view to what has been described as "the good life. According to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy,

¹ Vine Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*, Golden, Colorado : Fulcrum Publishing, 1997, 4.

² Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life*, New York: Verso, 2004, 98.

Life has ceased to be a horizon of sense and historicity, a principle of individual or collective action; it has become the endless or unlimited production of the conditions for not ceasing to be. Life is the production of the possibility of not ceasing to be within the unlimited possibility of ceasing to be.³

Automation, datafication's twin, has replaced human capabilities, paradoxically derived from the Western-centric myth of the autonomous human, predominantly white, rational subject. And automation runs the risk of reproducing the infinitely biased, power-driven, and exclusionary mechanisms that we have sought to critique and defuse. Should we subscribe to the twofold argument that resorting to such technologies is better than nothing, or worse better than human, with the risk of leaving out the persons that Judith Butler refers to as "the subject who is no subject (...) neither alive nor dead, neither fully constituted as a subject nor fully deconstituted in death."⁴

Beyond Vine Deloria's provocatively radical take on Western epistemologies, we still need to ask ourselves a series of questions about our academic contribution to the common good, a notion that in turn needs to be questioned, since hypothetical commonalities may originate in hegemonic constructs that serve to justify and perpetuate structures of domination. How can we ensure that we critically engage with society without reproducing or consolidating power-driven mechanisms? How can we ensure the resubjectivation of those who have been rendered invisible, voiceless, and faceless by the dominant norms that govern our social organization? Can we do truly collaborative research without falling into the pitfalls of epistemic domination? Is it possible to escape the dominant frameworks of thought and knowledge production while shifting the geographies of reason locally and globally? If so, how? How can we rethink our processes of legitimizing and evaluating what qualifies as scientific questioning and/or production? Can epistemic justice serve as an operative concept to guide our collaborative efforts and ensure our transformative impact on society as well as on ourselves as politically driven institutions?

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fragile Skin of the World*, Cory Stockwell trans., Cambridge, 2021, 47.

⁴ Butler, *op. cit.*, 98..