



## ***Reflecting on New Forms of Knowledge Production and “Epistemic Violence” – a Dialogue***

by Andrea Hollington, Nina Schneider

**Andrea:**

Nina, you have worked in a number of different countries and academic contexts. What experiences did you have with regard to knowledge production in those different environments?

**Nina:**

I have mainly studied in Germany and Britain, but also had the opportunity to spend several years in Brazil, and a semester at Columbia University in New York. My impression was that all research cultures have their own specific strengths and weaknesses. Of course, this is highly subjective and it is difficult to generalize on any “academic culture”. Each university has its own mission and they also develop over time. Still, it may be fair to say that while in some places critical interrogation of the subject, method, and discipline is outright expected, in others it may be a threat to your career. In Britain, for instance, it may have taken a long time to criticize the colonial period, but from the 1970s onwards there was a great interest in subaltern and postcolonial studies and subsequent critical schools. In general, it seems that most British universities have a keen interest in new methods and approaches. My impression from the US is that you have a lot of diversity within departments. Visionary intellectuals who severely criticize the status quo, coexist with more conservative intellectuals. For example, at Columbia University Edward Said (author of *Orientalism* and many other books) shared a departmental floor with Samuel Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civilizations*. Brazil and other Latin American countries seem to be marked by a critical tradition that may be labelled “socially engaged”. Again, though, you cannot generalize, for you can find diversity in every culture including clashes along ideological lines. But by and large, I would dare say that this socially engaged academic tradition is a defining feature of Latin American scholarship. From colleagues from Namibia, South Africa, and Columbia I have also learnt that these critical Southern views are given much more room in African and Latin American universities, so it may be worth exploring to what extent this applies to much of the so-called “Global South” (a problematic, but in this case helpful, heuristic category). Much critical scholarship, like subaltern, decolonial or post-colonial history, for example, has emanated from the South, and taken the form of critical responses to the colonial heritage or unequal power relations. The traditional production of knowledge, which had in many ways sustained unequal power relations and silenced the voices of the colonized, started to be disrupted, and the very production of knowledge was questioned. In sum, experiences of different research cultures are very personal. To my knowledge there is no detailed literature on key characteristics of academic

cultures across the globe, but that would be a very interesting subject! It would enable us to identify the benefits and shortcomings of different academic traditions and enable us to better identify our own methodologic and thematic blindspots.

**Andrea:**

The experience that I had is that there are numerous very engaged intellectuals in various institutions and contexts, and very interesting debates that challenge established norms in dominant academia – like for example in Jamaica, I was really impressed by the ways of knowledge production and the ways in which the University of the West Indies is open to so many different ideas, even from non-intellectuals, that they try to integrate into the university. They often have events where they invite poets, or writers, or musicians to give public lectures, and then they have discussions on certain topics. And the events that the university hosts will be announced on the radio and people from outside academia come and they listen to these talks and they engage. And there is not such a big gap between academia and the rest of society. And I was so impressed by that, but I often think that such ways of knowledge production do not really make it into dominant or mainstream academia. I think that is a problem: we do have a lot of different ways of thinking and ways of producing knowledge in various parts of the world but people don't really get to know about them unless they go there and really find out for themselves. I think we need to find a way to acknowledge, circulate, and integrate such epistemological approaches. When we look at academic knowledge production on an international scale we can see that there is a hegemonic system in which (scholars at) Northern Universities and their output, especially in Europe and the USA, have more power. And this system generates, stabilizes, and reproduces itself – but there is so much that we could learn from other approaches to thinking, discussing, exchanging, presenting, and writing.

**Nina:**

I think there is a difference between a public outreach event, which is very much en vogue now (in British academia “public impact” has become a major funding requirement), and the ways knowledge is hierarchized or even defined (who defines what as “knowledge”). For instance: who gets a chair, who can publish in the high-ranking journals, who becomes a commission member, who sets the new research agenda in the field, right? If you look at those higher academic ranks there is less and less representation of different voices. Bringing in a Latin American perspective: I was struck by an article from 2015 that investigated who successfully publishes in the two most important journals in the field of Latin American Studies. The authors found that only 7 percent of the entirety of the publications analyzed were authored by Latin American scholars. The majority of articles was published by US scholars and a smaller percentage by US-based scholars of Latin American descent. Many reasons may explain this imbalance, including the undeniably high quality of many US universities. Yet, there are also many ways of epistemic gate-keeping [...] for instance, language issues, different writing styles, and access to good education to begin with. But if we were to elaborate a vision of an ideal world of knowledge production, in pursuit of the best possible kind of research, we would ideally assess as much other knowledge as is available (other in the sense of additional, new, still-unknown-to-me). Ideally, we would have access to different knowledges to be able to see our own blind spots, correct ourselves, and expand our horizons. In short, to learn and unlearn. This, however, does not necessarily mean that you integrate all the alternative forms of knowledge with equal weight [...]. That is yet another controversial issue for debate: Who sets the rules for hierarchizing knowledge, for defining what qualifies as academic “knowledge” or as “nonsense”? In my view, this tension between “pluralizing knowledge” and checking the quality of different knowledges remains unresolved, and one of the most interesting questions for scholars and engaged intellectuals of our times.

**Andrea:**

Especially with regard to the aspect of publishing we have a lot of problems, because we are not only excluding others due to the way we publish, with our peer-reviewed journals and accessibility issues, we are also limiting ourselves a lot, because we have established this writing tradition, this genre of academic writing, which is like a very special genre. First of all, when we do research, we often encounter multimodal phenomena. And we already limit ourselves because we have to use language to express them... in fact, we have to use special language to express them because we have to express ourselves in a specific academic way that is acceptable for those journals. It is a special genre that we have to write in. Knowledge production in other cultures or societies may have other ways of expressing knowledge which do not fit into those particular journals. So we see that many academics and their writings get excluded from those kinds of publications. But then, it is publishing in those journals that opens up the possibilities of getting certain kinds of positions or being successful in academia. And another problematic issue is the accessibility of those journals in terms of who can read those articles, who gets beyond the big paywalls of those journals. So, it is not only a question of who can write and publish in those journals, it is also – when we include the level of students for example – about who can read the papers in such journals, which libraries provide access? So here we have several levels of exclusion of others, especially students from various parts of the world, from participating in mainstream, or commonly received, forms of knowledge production and dissemination.

**Nina:**

You raise many interesting points [...]. When you were talking about different forms of writing and genres, I was reminded of a debate about historical forms of writing. Critics of the discipline of History have argued that the way we narrate the past and our dominant concept of time is by and large very “Western”: linear or even teleological, and oriented towards a kind of “progress”. This automatically presumed “progress” “diffused” from the Western world across the globe (as if an academic heritage of Cold War modernization theory). Some Asian and African historians (prominently Ashis Nandy) have criticized this kind of historical writing and suggested alternative forms instead; for instance, a circular understanding of history, common among various indigenous cultures. Or, for instance, ambiguity, which is completely foreign to the writing style expected of Western historians – two contradictory things happen simultaneously and cannot be explained easily. The problem is how to practically and constructively include these interventions. My impression is that, by and large, the historical discipline has yet to find a way to integrate these criticisms on a deeper level. Although subaltern history and postcolonial thought have been received, and their authors are expected to write in a less Western-centric way, much of it seems to remain on a rhetorical level. These critical schools have neither significantly changed the structures and methods of the historical discipline, nor been actually included in the majority of historical writing. At least it is left to the individual historians’ decision, rather than included as a kind of obligatory self-critical method of historical knowledge production. Certainly, some individual historians have produced good accounts that include non-Western thought and methods both in their content and narrative form, but this inclusion could be much more systematic. Let me provide you with an example. The majority of historical narratives only look at either the “West”/“North” or the “South”, we lack cross-North-South comparisons, because this is taken to violate the conventions of the historical discipline [critics would say “we can’t compare apples with pears”, but who says what is an apple and what is a pear, and who dictates that they cannot be compared?]. To conclude, certain barriers within the disciplines are maintained, and it is difficult to challenge them and push them into new territory.

**Andrea:**

I think what you are referring to is what I would call, in a sense, hypocrisy, because we talk about wanting this change, including others, and being more open to other ways of thinking, and ways of producing knowledge. But very often when we open ourselves to other forms, we call it “alternative”; we say, for instance, this is an “alternative workshop” because it includes other voices, forms of presenting, non-academic or other-academic views that are not in the Western-centric tradition. Or we say “this is an alternative publication” because it does not follow the established rules for writing and publishing set in dominant academia. But this word, “alternative”, somehow devaluates the whole project, as if it is not part of “real” academia, it is something “alternative” happening at the side. This is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues in his book *Epistemologies of the South*: by calling Southern epistemologies “alternative” you somehow play them down, as though they are not on the same level. And that’s also what you see because those things do not usually get published in the same kind of journals or get the same kind of reach, it doesn’t get the same funding in the end, it doesn’t make it to the same audience.

**Nina:**

And I have to confess that I myself sometimes have problems reading African scholarly narratives. I have read a lot of African and Asian literature by scholars who have passed through the US system, partly because I spot these scholars faster and their work is more accessible in our library system. But recently I read an African piece and I found it a very hard read because of its unfamiliar narrative structure. I could not identify the main idea or main argument, missed summary sentences, and overall to me it seemed very fuzzy. Probably the best way is to bring people together, discuss at a conference, and co-produce knowledge in a dialogic way. One thing is the discussion and another is to find a narrative form.

**Andrea:**

We can see this already happening, partly; that we have these workshops where we bring different people together and discuss. But the problem is that the engaged intellectuals who try to make a difference are probably still a minority, and their attempts to be more open and accessible in changing our ways of knowledge production are not really taken seriously by some of those who are in the position to implement these changes in the academic system. It seems it may take a long time until the diversity of thinking, discussing and publishing will be established as a norm.

**Nina:**

Yes, you may be right. I would like to return to another point you just mentioned, about the “alternative knowledge” and the de Sousa Santos reference. Let’s turn for a moment to power structures, because in the end it comes down to power structures, or who is given the authority to produce knowledge. So, if you look at how to change power structures, it is difficult to include “alternative” or “formerly silenced” kinds of knowledge directly. First, you have to have a counter-narrative, and then manage to “catapult” these kinds of knowledge into your discipline. Because it seems that if you include them directly, these voices get lost. Remember, for instance, our discussion at the 2017 GSSC conference, when a South African scholar argued that in order to include marginal South African positions you have to go by the national route, and then you can include those accounts in larger narratives (disciplinary field, global academia). The key point here is that this process of “alternative” knowledge inclusion in a discipline may involve several steps. What is probably difficult, from our perspective, is that you do not get much support when you try to include different knowledges. Let’s take an example: In Germany, you do not have many research centers focusing on the Global South. There are several well-established area-study centers (e.g. African and Latin American studies), but if you try

to contribute to knowledge concerning the Global South, positions have yet to be established. There is little room for renewing our disciplines by drawing on the precious critical methodological, thematic, and, as we just discussed, narrative input from the “South”. But engaging with these questions goes to the very foundations of how we produce knowledge. It is a fundamental research task (or in German: Grundlagenforschung). Concerning the discipline of History, it is true that historians have started to analyze how knowledge has been produced and circulated (and been censored) in the past, but there seems to be very little translation of this self-critical inquiry into the discipline itself and into how we actually produce knowledge ourselves. Most historians just continue writing their accounts of the past, as they did before. The history of knowledge has become a subject in German academia, but its self-reflective and socially engaged potential has not been realized or put into practice. Instead the history of knowledge and knowledge production seems like a newly added but somewhat soulless subject that trickled down from the US and Britain, but one still treated as very far detached from our own agency.

**Andrea:**

Coming back to Boaventura de Sousa Santos. He actually wrote this aforementioned book, which is basically about epistemicide and how other ways of knowledge production are not really appreciated in the dominant Western-centric academic discourse. He writes about epistemologies of the South as possibilities of social and academic transformation, but he also sheds light on Southern epistemologies as shared experiences of exclusion and silencing of people and their ways of knowledge production. In other words, he addresses exactly those problems that we have touched upon in our discussion. He also emphasizes that it has to be a horizontal dialog and discussion between the many existing knowledges that leads to innovation in what he refers to as “ecologies of knowledge”. This non-hierarchical dialog between the different perspectives is something that needs much more promotion.

**Nina:**

I find this notion of “epistemicide” provocative but interesting. There is also the term “epistemic violence” brought in by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [...], although she soon abandoned this term. Originally, she even spoke of “epistemic rape” [...]. Even though we would have to carefully specify what we mean by “epistemic violence”, as a heuristic concept it seems helpful. Basically, it tasks us to witness, problematize, and ideally put an end to the ubiquitous instances of censoring of knowledge, and to find practical methods to include a polyphony of voices. While theoretically, this may be old hat (at least for those familiar with critical thought from the South, or feminist schools), the interesting question now is how to practically and methodologically combat “epistemic violence”. Let’s return to de Sousa Santos. He is at the Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES, Centre for Social Studies) in Portugal, but also Professor at the University of Wisconsin. Moreover, he is very popular in Brazil, and often travels to Africa. He initiated a project with African scholars where they tried to produce knowledge cooperatively. They explored how scholars would approach a certain topic from an African philosophical point of view, and how the same topic would have been studied from a Portuguese philosophical perspective. Subsequently and with the insight gained from the comparative epistemic perspective, they tried to identify the weak points of their respective approaches (which does the job better), but also discovered aspects that their own (or old) approach simply failed to see, while their partners took them into account. The outcome of this project was a very interesting exchange but also valuable the realization that certain things are not translatable, because specific words or methods do not exist in another research culture. Now the question remains: what to do with this? What is the implication for our attempts to produce new and more egalitarian knowledge than before? In my view, we need many more projects of this kind, projects that bring together people from different research cultures with the goal of producing knowledge collaboratively. I know that the Volkswagen Foundation wants to initiate such a program. I think this is what we

need in the future. I hope there will be more funding for such work, because right now academic careers are built on individual achievements, and collaborative productions bring disadvantages. We need to have the opportunity to experiment with collective research production and then analyze and assess the outcomes, as de Sousa Santos did. This would involve a critical interrogation of our own practices and help us identify the “epistemic violence” we cause (if unintentionally). Crossing South-North or North-South boundaries certainly helps to include these “new” approaches in our disciplines and institutions. We may still have a long road ahead, but is there not a lot of potential here?