



## Controlling Knowledge and the Role of Engaged Intellectuals

### Introduction

by Jonathan DeVore, Andrea Hollington, Tijo Salverda, Sinah Kloß, Nina Schneider, Oliver Tappe

The desire to combat Eurocentrism and the dominance of Euro-American epistemologies in global knowledge production has been pronounced at least since the second half of the twentieth century. Contestations of these epistemological inequalities include, for example, subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, decoloniality, “Southern Theory”, and recent aims to “decolonize” curricula, more generally. These intellectual fields have helped to better explain, and challenge, concrete mechanisms of constraint resulting from exclusion in knowledge production and silencing, also referred to as “epistemicide” (de Sousa Santos) or “epistemic racism” (Mignolo). They have also shown that other traditions of knowledge production and seeing the world have existed for a long time and are anything but “new”. Yet despite these laudable discussions, epistemic biases and inequalities in global structures of knowledge production seem to stubbornly persist.

In this issue contributors from different disciplinary and national backgrounds critically reflect on processes of knowledge production. Underlying these reflections are various implicit and explicit questions: Has there been a major (epistemic) transformation towards more balanced global knowledge production, or have inequalities been intensified? How are terms defined, and what do we understand by ‘global knowledge production’ or ‘epistemic inequality’? How can we adapt our research topics or methods to shape a more egalitarian (global) kind of knowledge? Can we identify the (conscious) ‘gatekeepers’ of epistemic exclusion; for example, disciplinary conventions, *modi operandi* of publication and funding schemes, or interiorized ‘colonial’ practices? And if so, what can we do about them at conferences, and in the publishing and funding sectors? How can privileged scholars engage in critical self-reflection on their academic practices – not only both at a theoretical and methodological level, but also in their everyday practices? By means of addressing these questions in a variety of ways, the aim of the issue is to investigate how, why, and to what extent institutional, financial, and ideological factors constrain the manoeuvring spaces, and how scholars, artists, and civil-society institutions can sensitise themselves to, unmask, and resist them.

A key characteristic of engaged intellectuals is the aspiration to act on behalf of the marginalized, the subalterns who (allegedly) cannot speak, to address and problematize global injustice and violence. Yet what exactly does it mean when engaged intellectuals from the Global North and/or the Global South 'give someone a voice'? The contribution by Anne and Sophie Storch reflect on the act of 'giving them a voice', an interaction that can imply power and appropriation, generosity and patronage. They explicitly encourage linguists working in far-away places to consider those ambivalences involved in giving a voice to the Other. In a similar vein, Chen Tian introduces a specific South-South encounter, namely that of Chinese language trainers in Africa and their experiences there (presented as poetry). This poetic experiment raises the question of whether this interaction – by avoiding Global North intermediaries – may provide new dialogues, recognition, or maybe new hierarchies. Pedro and Fernandes shift the attention to the role of autobiographies in knowledge production and in countering epistemic exclusion. In different cases of toxic contamination, autobiographies of victims open up new spaces in which to address global injustice and inequalities – certainly a field for engaged intellectuals to take sides with the marginalized.

Starting from personal experiences of 'exile', Rosabelle Boswell confronts (remaining) epistemic inequalities in South Africa. As a non-South African black female anthropologist, she has not only first-hand experiences of epistemic inequalities in South Africa, but also provides insights about (the lack of) more balanced global knowledge production. She shows how her awareness of the politics of knowledge production helped in dealing with these confrontations and the pursuit of her own research interests. In a similarly personal way, Ana Paula Bastos recounts her journey, beginning as a trained neo-classical economist from the North who has to realise that all her development tools, models, and creeds are useless when confronted with the on-site situation in the Brazilian Amazon region. Taught to believe that well-being and development could be achieved raising the GDP and ensuring free markets, she suddenly realised not only how useless but even how detrimental this progress model was. Here, on the local ground in the Amazon, people lived healthy lives, took care of the environment, and exchanged products – quite the opposite of the ideas she had learned about the road towards 'progress' being associated with money circulation, increasing consumption, and the free market. This experience taught her, as she recalls, to 'sit and listen', and inspired her to ponder both the true ingredients of 'well-being', and the absurd conventions and complicity of her discipline.

Ciraj Rassool, based at the University of the Western Cape, critically engages with one of the key institutions in the remembrance and production of epistemological visions, the museum. In reflection upon histories and epistemologies of museums, in particular in South Africa and Germany, he argues that a new understanding of the idea of the 'museum' is required – one that allows us to overcome, and change, the colonial frameworks through which we understand societies and people.

In a timely piece, Vito Laterza, an anthropologist and development scholar, highlights the complicity of Western scholarship in the maintenance of epistemological inequalities with counterparts elsewhere in the world, particularly in Africa. Though he argues that Western scholars have long been subject to 'schizophrenic' tendencies regarding the production of knowledge, especially current waves of xenophobic populism in Europe are posing a serious threat to ongoing efforts to address knowledge inequalities between European and African academies. One way to counter this, he argues, is to refrain from studying African issues in isolation, and instead to aim to better understand how these relate to business, political, and societal developments elsewhere – in Europe. Ines Stolpe and Enkhbayaryn Jigmeddorj also take a critical look at English scholarship with a regional focus on Mongolia. They demonstrate how, particularly, Western scholars disregard Mongolian discourses about the question of whether the country has even been under colonial rule. Instead, local discourses about Mongolia's past are often more complex and nuanced than English scholarship on the country accounts for. Hence, as they argue, it is important to raise awareness of knowledge production taking place in linguistic spheres other than that of English-dominated Western-centric knowledge production.

Carsten Junker, subsequently, offers a theoretical debate on the theme of the issue by focusing on the notions of differences, diversity, decolonization and destruction. These '4 Ds', as he calls them, are discussed by the author with regard to developments towards inclusive ways of knowledge production within American Studies, academia and beyond. This article offers a critical rethinking of epistemologies at German universities. The piece by Ingo Warnke provides a discussion of linguistics as a discipline and how this relates to the intellectual. The author argues that linguistics is fairly invisible in the world (beyond the discipline) and that therefore, linguistics as a discipline is not open to the creative and critical thinking of the intellectual. He underlines his perspectives on linguistics and the divide between the discipline and intellectual persona 'who is in the world and in whom the world resonates' by shedding light on the historical development of the discipline under the influence of Noam Chomsky. By engaging with the writings of Immanuel Kant, the author criticises the status quo of the discipline and argues for more intellectuality in linguistics.

The anthropologist Doreh Taghavi offers some general philosophical reflections on the production and processing of knowledge: How is knowledge not only generated, but more importantly processed? What are the conditions for knowledge to 'be successful' or come to 'be believed'? How can we overcome what she identifies as 'dangerous' forms of epistemic bias like those that accelerate climate change? Academics should, the author concludes, continue to develop awareness of epistemic diversification and actively contribute to ending epistemological bias. In an interesting conversation with each other, Andrea Hollington and Nina Schneider equally discuss the relevance of diversity, as various epistemological approaches may actually learn from one another. By bringing different research cultures together, not only may blind spots of particular thematic and methodological approaches be revealed, but opportunities may also emerge to explore ways in which to better understand the world we inhabit.

Finally, Penelope Allsobrook addresses epistemic inequality in the form of a poetic contribution. It takes the reader on a journey to cultural ways of knowing, in particular through the lens of the Xhosa language and culture. The author involves several thought processes as well as conversations, to develop a beautiful and thought-provoking account of epistemologies that not only highlights the fact that knowledge is a process but that also illustrates different perspectives and methods of understanding. Dialogues and a poem enrich the text and underline the creative nature of the author's way of making a point in the form of an inspiring story.

In sum, the contributions cover the theme of epistemic control and egalitarian knowledge production from a variety of perspectives. They address both the theoretical and methodological level, but also highlight scholarly everyday practices. Ultimately, they all engage with how we can, and must, be open to critical self-reflection in our academic practices!