

Epistemic Justice

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This essay is intended as a broad-stroke sketch of a particular problem, and therefore does not follow academic standards of referencing. Two remarks are given at the end, nonetheless. Proper names refer to other contributors at the conference, but the argument should largely be understandable without knowledge of their contributions.

Introduction

Not all knowledges are granted equal rights to existence. Once we realise that multiple, incompatible knowledge systems exist, and are also *entitled* to existence, it is only a small step to realising that the realization of such entitlements is far from straightforward. In fact, this effectuation requires effort on the side of individuals, and effort on the side of institutions. This is a logical consequence: knowledge systems by definition hold claims to truth. When the truths of incompatible knowledge systems compete, then from the perspective of one knowledge system, the other is at best untrue in an innocent and simple sense. At worst, it is irrational, fraudulent, or mentally insane. This insanity is then not an intrinsic defect of the rejected knowledge system, but a consequence of specific actors being positioned to define what is insane.

In contexts of innovation, knowledge positions matter in many different ways. Assuming for a while that innovation is usually about solving some sort of problem, then the first way in which a knowledge position matters to innovation is in *knowing the problem*, and more precisely, it matters in *which specific way* the problem is known. A farmer who pumps up ground water to deal with drought, literally sees a different problem than a geologist who is concerned with the integrity of soil layers and the water table. But it also matters how the problem is known to *relate*: to persons or specific social groups, to the environment, to existing technological arrangements, and any part of our social, technical and natural worlds. For some, a low price of fabric only relates to markets and an overabundance of supply; for others, it relates to the livelihood of their communities and the dignity they can muster. And, finally, it matters how the problem is known to be potentially *solved*, or to be impossible to solve. Neoliberal parties in the Netherlands want traffic congestion to be solved by building more roads. Socialists are instead convinced that the solution is in better public transport. In view of the inequality of knowledges, this raises the question of who is going claim the space for their knowledge to speak to innovation – in each of these different ways.

Knowledge hierarchies and epistemic justice

This is thus a matter of what I call *epistemic justice*, or *knowledge justice* if you like. Where justice in general aspires to rightly distribute certain goods – I am, indeed, only speaking of *distributive justice* here – epistemic justice aspires to fairly distribute goods that are related to knowledge: the holding and ownership of knowledge, the presentation of knowledge, the recognition of knowledge, and

perhaps most importantly: the agency that derives from knowledge, the changes that can be made with knowledge, and, ultimately, the power exercised through knowledge.

Just as democracy cannot be reduced to majority vote, and just as justice cannot be reduced to all simply having an equal share of the proverbial pie, epistemic justice cannot be simply defined as equally acknowledging all truths that are around. Indeed, it is not possible to simply include all knowledges on an equal footing, because their respective truths might be irreconcilable. So, what are the more specific rights and duties that come with being a knowledge owner? First, there is of course the right for an individual – or perhaps a group or community – to have knowledge and to be recognized as the bearer of knowledge. This entails that whenever this knowledge speaks to an innovation, whether in its problem definition, its connections, or its potential solutions, there should somehow be a right to have one's knowledge included into that innovation process.

As said, the problem is then that hegemonic knowledge systems will *de facto* have the power to tell the rational from the insane; this is the very definition of hegemony. Hence, one question we must venture upon is: *what is a sensible way of confronting and comparing and prioritizing knowledges?*

This brings me to a second point. This is that owners of knowledge are entitled to an epistemology – epistemology being the framework of justification of their knowledge; or: the criteria that they adhere to that knowledge has to meet in order to be accepted as rational and true. Up to a certain extent, knowledges are entitled to protection against hegemonic positions that render them irrational or insane. At this point, I borrow an argument from Shiv Visvanathan. What he points out is that it is not sufficient to democratize knowledge itself. On top of that, we need to democratize *the critique of knowledge*.

I prefer to phrase it as follows. We need to recognize that epistemologies, or the justifications of knowledge, are equally multiple as are the knowledges themselves, and they are in principle legitimate to exist in this multiplicity. The primary danger we have to steer away from, then, is that dominant epistemologies get to define whether or not other epistemologies are valid. Visvanathan's call for democratizing the critique of knowledge then becomes a call for correcting unjust hierarchies between epistemologies. This means enabling subordinate epistemologies to also critique the hegemonic epistemologies. This is where equality differs from equity. The equality of putting all knowledges together would be doomed to fail. Equity, in the sense of having equal chances to prosperity and self-realization can only be achieved through empowering disempowered knowledges *in tandem with their epistemologies*.

Obviously, modern scientific rationalities and capitalist market logics are among the first to qualify as hegemonic and define other logics as insensible. It needs saying though, that we must also recognize the tremendous value of modern scientific rationality and what it has brought us, or I should say: the good things it has brought some of us. For it has also brought bad things to others, and we do need to recognize that injustice is easily done to other (*de facto* subordinate) epistemologies if we let innovation only be informed by market logics and modern scientific rationality.

Epistemic justice and innovation

In innovation, this search for epistemic justice raises more specific challenges. Let us look back at some of the things that we have seen in the past days. One of the recurring themes has been that crafts should be seen as practices of knowledge, and I could not agree more. This knowledge is partly embodied, often very much localized, learned by doing (or by imitation), furthered by tinkering, and

corroborated by whether it works or not. But these ways of knowing are anomalous to the epistemologies of modern science and logics of markets. Recall the cynical remark that Molly faces: these people do not know anything, and they cannot learn... If we want to emancipate craft, and get it to be taken seriously as a practice of knowledge and innovation, we need to show how the underlying epistemologies work. Several presentations during the past week have shown promising avenues in this direction. But it is not only that, we must also enable them to level *critique* against scientific and market logics: to point out the propensities towards reduction and decontextualization, and how those are at best just not productive, but ultimately potentially violent – recall James’ talk at this point.

Another theme that has recurred a lot is the idea that handcrafted produce is personal, it reflects identity, it reflects a connection to nature, and then I probably forget quite a few connections. The problem that these connections were meant to exemplify – in my view rightly so – was that there is no place for such considerations in market and scientific logics. A first step, that we have for example seen in Valentina’s talk, is to acquire the language of market thinkers – in terms of business models – and then to change that logic from within. I think a second step is needed there. For this change from within to be possible, the proposers of these alternative business models must be able to articulate and explicate *how* existing thinking in terms of business models excludes their ways of knowing the craft as being connected to the personal, identity, and nature.

A third and last example that came by this week, is that handloom weaving, and craft more general, must be thought of as a collective process, not as a single product made by one person. This has interesting consequences; one being that there is no single point where it is located, and that there is no single actor who owns it. This entails that also the subject of knowledge – that is: the entity that ‘does the knowing’ – is not per se a single and identifiable human being. This in turn means that all existing attempts at democratization of innovation, such as constructive technology assessment, consensus conferences, or citizen juries are bound to fail in this context. These forms of micro publics are aimed at letting persons speak, not other entities.

These lessons for handloom weaving and crafts are matters of *epistemic justice* in innovation. They relate to which problems matter, how these problems are known, what the possible and desirable solutions are and how these are known, and how the problem is known to be connected. And more specifically, they offer these alternative accounts from within epistemologies that can very well be enabled to spell out how they are rendered irrational by hegemonic epistemologies.

Epistemic justice vis-à-vis *anchoring innovation*

As to the concept of *anchoring innovation*, the following lessons can be learned. While I am very sympathetic to the notion, I also think it can be further developed, especially in view of the above considerations of epistemic justice. I understand the ‘anchoring’ part of ‘anchoring innovation’ as the connection an innovation makes or needs to make for it to be successful; either to an existing repertoire, context, or past (a point that Sumitra and I also made during our musical experiment: even novel music is a mixture of new and old); to existing social groups, markets, institutional structures (just like not every novel sort of yarn, especially machine-spun, is apt for handloom weaving); or to shared imaginaries of a future (this is where the mountaineering version of anchoring comes in; think for example of a low-carbon future that is generally agreed upon to be desirable: innovations that support this ideal will in some sense connect better than innovations that hamper it).

But the notion is intrinsically asymmetrical. It makes a distinction between on the one hand the anchor, which represents agency; and on the other hand the rock bottom, which is acted upon. And as 'anchoring innovation' is a concept that the analyst brings to the world, the analyst (or activist, for that matter) assumes the responsibility of defining one thing to be the anchor, and another thing to be the rock bottom. This choice is in no way arbitrary or trivial, but instead has important consequences. It is the responsibility of defining what is old, and what is new. Of defining what is the inside, and what is the outside, periphery or core, or the relevant scope in the first place. It tells the 'changer' from the 'changed', and implicitly lends legitimacy to the act of changing.

These choices are not neutral but have consequences. Importantly, *these choices have consequences for the epistemologies involved.* It is vital for an epistemology to be defined as inside or outside, as changed or changer, and ultimately as rational or insane. For the analyst, it determines on which side of history the actor ends up. And for the activist, it determines whether it offers an effective critique of hegemonic rationalities, or inadvertently reproduces them.

Epilogue

What I learned this week for my own thinking through innovation and epistemic justice is that it made once more clear how many different ways of knowing there are, and how too easily we tend to think we have taken sufficient care of them, that we understand the concerns and will adopt them in our larger, overarching knowledge systems. We will continue doing injustice to the epistemologies involved, as long as we keep trying to recast their knowledge into the hegemonic epistemologies. The real challenge is thus to find ways to suspend our epistemologies when encountering others.

Notes:

- The text by Visvanathan that is mentioned: Visvanathan, S. (2009). The search for cognitive justice. *Seminar*, 597.
- The concept of Anchoring Innovation was taken from the Dutch research programme by that name, see <https://www.ru.nl/oikos/anchoring-innovation/anchoring-innovation-concept-history/>