The decolonial epistemology project accepts the connection of knowledge and power but then goes in a more critically normative direction.

Justifications for global social and political status hierarchies of all sorts are most often grounded in an epistemic status hierarchy, that some types of persons, cultures, and societies are behind in how to know and hence unreliable knowers, highly suggestible, too ignorant to make informed or rational decisions, and unable to contribute much to the information economy which is portrayed as the driving force behind global economic growth. The cutting edge of new knowledge production, it is thought, is occurring in the research and design centers in the global north, whether in private or public domains. If the poor of the global South do have useful knowledge, for example about plant species or natural medicines, they are said to wield this knowledge irrationally and inefficiently, and thus it would be better for corporations to copyright the knowledge and control its development, application, and distribution. Global capitalist technocracies rule through elite experts given the right to make decisions about our shared natural resources, about military operations, about the economy, and about strategic international politics. The hierarchy of knowers and knowing systems mirrors the hierarchy of global power and social status. The cornerstone of racism and sexism has always concerned claims about the ability to be objective, dispassionate, and competent knowers. Thus, the question of knowledge, and of who has knowledge, and of how knowledge claims are best assessed, is key to social change. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.”

A decolonial knowledge project must have two overall components: (1) to critique existing theories and practices concerning knowledge for the ways in which these theories and practices may be supporting the colonial structure of knowledge, and (2) developing new reconstructions about how to think about knowledge and knowing practices.
More specifically, decolonial work in epistemology must address the following:

a) Assessments of presumptive epistemic credibility and authority that track economic and social power;
b) restricted access to information necessary for knowledge;
c) how some kinds of knowledge and knowing practices are valued while others are ignored or classified as illegitimate;
d) the social production of ignorance, and solutions to this;
e) the relationship between social identities and knowledge, toward both critique and reconstruction;
f) what has been called “rationality”, its history, specificity, and uses;
g) methodologies and epistemologies of the sciences; and
h) new epistemic virtues that need cultivation in light of current real-world conditions.
i) New critical assessments of traditional and indigenous knowledges and epistemologies.

Each of these topics should be addressed in an intersectional way, to explore the variable and multiple forms of hierarchy that exist in every given context.

There is today a growing area of inquiry addressed to these topics, with a large variety of research and methodological orientations. These questions will bring us into the large arena of social epistemology, feminist epistemology, the social studies of science, and decolonial studies.

Such a project benefits epistemology as a whole. In exploring with a fresh eye the ways in which the disenfranchised have been epistemically discredited, we can develop new insights and theories about the general nature of knowledge and of knowers.

Topics and Readings

All participants should read in advance of each class. Readings can be found on ISJ website www.isj.acu.edu.au

I. Knowledge and Identity (7-8 September)


II. Epistemologies of Ignorance (9-10 September)

2. Jose Medina, “Epistemic Responsibility and Culpable Ignorance” chapter 4 from The Epistemology of Resistance

Optional reading:


III. Science, Values and Context (11 and 14 September)

1. Helen Longino “Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Values in Science”
2. Elizabeth Anderson, “Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce” www-personal.umich.edu/~eandersn/Hypatiaanderson.pdf {N.b.: this paper should be available online here; if not one can also go to www.sgrp.typepad.com/sgrp/winter-2007-symposia-i-anderson-and-ii-superson}

IV. Critiquing the Epistemology of Western Modernity (15-16 September)

1. Sandra Harding Sciences from Below chapters 5 and 7

V. Case Studies (21-22 September)

1. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses, “Opening up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference” from Another Knowledge is Possible edited by de Sousa Santos (Verso 2007).
3. Margarita Flóres Alonso “Can We Protect Traditional Knowledge?” ibid

Contact
For more information please contact isj@acu.edu.au or call (02) 9739 2789