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Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements

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I am truly honored that Venkatesh Vaditya found my article [“The Local Consultant Will Not Be Credible’: How Epistemic Injustice is Experienced and Practised in Development Aid”](#) worthy of being discussed on the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond to [his thoughtful critique](#). My reply starts with an introduction in which I briefly sketch the essence of my original paper and Vaditya’s instructive comments. Responding to the issues he raised, I highlight development cooperation as a field of power asymmetries and colliding interests; colonialism as historical dimension of epistemic injustice in aid; and current counter-movements challenging Northern epistemic dominance. I conclude with a reflection on the momentum that has emerged through these movements and critical scholarship, calling for broadening and deepening interdisciplinary exchange to reveal unjust epistemic practices across societal fields.

## Introduction

In the article mentioned above, I use the concept of epistemic injustice to shed light on the discriminatory treatment of experts in and by development aid. Over the past fifteen years, a rich body of literature on epistemic (in-)justice has emerged, and many scholars have engaged in theorizing the phenomenon from philosophical viewpoints. My complement this literature with an empirical study that substantiates theoretical claims with findings from a social science research project. Drawing on expert interviews conducted in South Africa and Tanzania, I reveal how epistemic injustice is experienced, practiced and institutionalized in the context of development cooperation—specifically, in the context of advisory processes in which ‘local’ and ‘international’ experts are expected to interact as ‘partners’, yet operate in a highly unequal setting. The interview accounts indicate that experts from aid-receiving countries suffer a systematic credibility deficit which is closely interrelated with the credibility excess ‘international’ experts (usually meaning experts from Northern donor countries) profit from. My findings support José Medina’s claim that credibility excess can do harm and cause epistemic injustice when it contributes to the persistence of privilege and marginalisation.

In his discussion of my text, Venkatesh Vaditya highlights major findings from my study and makes valuable contextualising comments. For instance, he points out that a social imaginary of epistemic superiority resulting from colonialism manifests not only in North-South relations but also within a country like India, “where equally dominant (upper) caste epistemologies have integrated with the dominant western epistemologies”, and “the dominant caste society maintains and sustains its epistemic domination” (Vaditya 2020, 5), considering socially marginalised groups as passive recipients of ‘received theories’.

Moreover, he emphasises that critical development theory, post-colonial scholarship and Southern theory—to which I refer to in explaining the persisting inequality of experts and discrepancy between rhetoric and practice in the realm of aid—“were developed to seek human emancipation as their overt political position” and that they “would find out the

causative circumstances and historical contexts in which human being have been enslaved” (Vaditya 2020, 1).

Thus stressing the value and ambition of critical theories, Vaditya implies I don’t fully utilise their potential. In his discussion, he raises three major points of criticism, namely that the text would “present the development aid as a field without any contradictions in terms of economic dependency” (Vaditya 2020, 3); that “it captures the contextual dimension of epistemic injustice but not the historical one” and that it falls short of “pointing out counter movements at large that challenge[s] the epistemic dominance of the west in Africa particularly in Tanzania and South Africa” (Vaditya 2020, 6).

Re-reading my article, I realise that my focus on making explicit the testimonial and hermeneutic injustices experts experience in the context of aid has left little space for a more comprehensive contextualisation of these experiences.<sup>1</sup> While such contextualisation as well as a more thorough engagement with de- and postcolonial literature are indeed missing in this piece, they were substantial themes of my previous and subsequent works (Koch forthcoming; Koch and Weingart 2016). In the following, I draw on these works to respond to the issues raised by Vaditya, trying to provide more of the context and broader picture he found missing.

### **Power Asymmetries and Colliding Interests in Development Cooperation**

In my article in *Social Epistemology*, I introduce development as “an inter- and transnational area of political-economic business through which states provide assistance to other states, mainly in the form of financial resources and knowledge-related activities, such as capacity building and expert advice” (Koch 2020b, 480). I briefly delineate the contemporary ‘partnership’ paradigm that has gradually replaced the dichotomist rhetoric of previous decades (developed versus underdeveloped, donors versus recipients), and emphasizes the significance of ‘local’ knowledge for societal transformation. I end the paragraph pointing out that unchanged power asymmetries continue to shape cooperation behind the new narrative, without elucidating these further.

The unchanged power asymmetries in the back of aid-related advisory processes have been a major focus of the research project in which the expert interviews I draw on were generated.<sup>2</sup> The original study investigated the impact of foreign aid experts on policy processes in aid-receiving countries, using South Africa and Tanzania as contrasting empirical cases. Therefore, we carried out interviews with key actors involved in advisory processes in the policy fields of health, environment and education that were complemented with a survey and comprehensive document analysis. Contextualising our empirical material with different bodies of scholarship, including sociology of science, democracy theory, international relations and development studies, we show that unequal relations and colliding

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the critique that I didn’t provide a deeper discussion of the structural conditions and power asymmetries shaping development aid in general, and in South Africa and Tanzania in particular, was also raised by members of a philosophical colloquium at the University of Münster, Germany, to which I presented the article shortly after its publication.

<sup>2</sup> The project was conducted at Bielefeld University, Germany, from 2011 to 2017. It was led by Prof. Peter Weingart and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; project number 166741559; WE-972/30-1).

interests characterise the macro-, meso- and micro-level of advice in the realm of aid (Koch and Weingart 2016, 43–136).

Therein, it becomes very clear that development cooperation is far from being a field without any contradictions. Good intentions that are certainly found among actors involved, be they states, organisations or individuals, are counteracted by vested interests that range from extending geopolitical influence, fostering export and trade, increasing organisational budgets and ‘moving money’ to secure the continuation of aid business and individual careers. Such vested interests, as we show, are found on all sides and levels. However, it is undeniable that those on the donor side are in a privileged position to assert their interests, given the one-sided financial dependence on which aid relations are based. This core asymmetry remains unchanged despite the partnership rhetoric, and it inherently puts ‘partners’ into unequal positions. A high-level official in the Tanzanian Prime Minister’s Office, Regional Administration and Local Government, commented in this regard: “Let me tell you the truth: If our relationship is also influenced by donating, do you think you have much power if you are a recipient?” (Interviewee cited in Koch and Weingart 2016, 138). A retired health expert from Germany who had been working in Tanzania for decades conceded: “They say ‘we have to take every penny we can get.’ Never would someone say ‘well, that actually doesn’t fit’” (Interviewee cited in Koch and Weingart 2016, 148).

Our research report entails various accounts of interviewees that make abundantly clear how strongly the interaction between actors involved is still shaped by this unequal dependence. That it is less openly addressed as it doesn’t fit the idea of ‘partnership at eye-level’ makes relations even more intricate. In line with previous studies, our findings show that development cooperation under the partnership paradigm is heavily marked by the power asymmetry resulting from economic needs on the part of recipients. For all involved in advisory relations it is obvious, even if not loudly spoken out, who operates from which position.

Our research substantiates the significance of financial strength/dependence as one decisive condition of expert advice by providing six case studies from South Africa and Tanzania. While both African democracies have received lavish international support for system reforms in almost all fields of governance, the countries’ ways of dealing with donors vary considerably. A comparative perspective on the case studies shows that South African and Tanzanian actors’ positioning and room for manoeuvre are impacted by financial means, but also by administrative capacity and the strength of the local knowledge base in the respective sector (Koch and Weingart 2016, 330 et seq.).

However, despite notable differences in structural conditions and historical and contemporary aid relations, interviewees from both countries articulated experiences which I interpret as instances of epistemic injustice—a latent downgrading of epistemic credibility and expertise in individual interaction due to being categorised as ‘local’ (testimonial injustice), as well as a structural marginalisation in the expert market given procurement and employment practices that keep up the privilege of ‘international’ experts, essentially meaning experts from the North (hermeneutic injustice).

The fact that such experiences were voiced by highly qualified and experienced experts from both Tanzania *and* South Africa—despite the fact that the latter today is overall not much dependent on financial support and shows a much higher level of sovereignty—led me to re-analyse the empirical material through the lens of epistemic justice theory after the original research project was completed. This change of theoretical perspective shifted the focus from the structural conditions impacting on advisory processes to ethical aspects of expert advice and the epistemic hierarchisation happening therein. This hierarchisation and credibility deflation appears to occur irrespective of the economic background and extent of dependence. In fact, it seemed to be internalised and in some ways perpetuated even by those who criticised the prevailing differential credibility judgment (Koch 2020b, 485).

### **Colonialism as Historical Dimension of Epistemic Injustice in Aid**

In my analysis, I explain the phenomena with the persistence of a social imaginary of Northern epistemic community constructed in colonial times (Koch 2020b, 484). In so doing, I refer to critical African and Latin American theorists and philosophers that address the ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano 2000) in global knowledge relations (Grosfoguel 2011; Mignolo 2002; wa Thiong’o 1986). As Grosfoguel (2011) points out, colonial rulers consolidated their hegemony by constructing “a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world”. The colonial ‘package’ that structured people along dimensions such as class, race, labour, language, spirituality, and gender, entailed the privilege of Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies, dividing the World into centres of knowledge production and peripheries of knowledge consumption.

This form of ‘Eurocentric’ epistemic governance prevails until today in various fields, including global academia and international cooperation (Girvan 2007; Grosfoguel 2011; Lander 2006). According to Girvan (2007, 16), the latter is characterised by knowledge hierarchies that can be conceptualised as “a set of epistemic/ideological systems, with so-called international (that is, Northern) knowledge at the top and so-called local (that is, Southern) knowledge at the bottom” (16). Within this system, “international knowledge, in the form of the neo-liberal paradigm, claims universal applicability” (Girvan 2007, 16) and is affiliated with “path-breaking research leading to intellectual innovation” (Girvan 2007, 17). Local knowledge, in contrast, is framed as supplementary; it is unable to provide original solutions, “since the general answers are universally prescribed” (Girvan 2007, 17).

My empirical findings confirm Girvan’s diagnosis in various regards. The knowledge hierarchy as described above manifests itself most obviously in the assignment of roles when ‘international’ and ‘national’ experts are ‘paired’, and the former are assigned the tasks of leading, conceptualisation, analysis and writing whereas the latter are supposed to assist in data collection and logistics. The division of tasks—intellectual processing versus primary production—basically mirrors the colonial division of labour as reflected in today’s global science system (Olukoshi 2004).

The hierarchical classification of knowledge also comes to the fore in the common differentiation between international and national experts: While the former are ascribed high-quality expertise that is infused with ‘global’ experience and transferable worldwide, the latter are seen as contributing primarily through their knowledge of culture, institutions and

access to the respective country's people.<sup>3</sup> The discriminatory ascription of credibility—whereby international expertise is deemed high-quality and independent whereas local expertise available in recipient organisations or provided by national consultants is considered less profound and potentially biased—is a manifestation of the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000) in international cooperation.

This 'coloniality of power' renders the social imaginary of Northern epistemic superiority legitimate. I agree with Venkatesh Vaditya that this historical dimension was only briefly touched in my analysis. My text focused on revealing how epistemic injustice is practiced and experienced, rather than on its historicity, which doesn't mean the latter is not important.<sup>4</sup> Also, I have refrained from delineating the peculiar historical trajectories of aid relations in South Africa and Tanzania, as provided in Koch and Weingart (2016, 34 et seq.).

While these shape the setting in which expert advice takes place, they didn't seem to alter basic patterns of epistemic injustice occurring therein. That aid-related expert advice rests on the idea of deficit countries was felt by actors in both South Africa and Tanzania, despite the differences in terms of histories and structural conditions (Koch forthcoming; Lepenies 2009). The hierarchical knowledge order is, in fact, essential for the continuation and legitimization of international organisations' practices:

How else could they justify that their experts are able to analyse and design social change in societies where they have not lived for more than a few months or even weeks? That their competence in doing so is superior to those who have lived there all their lives? Only because they possess knowledge on social change which is universal in character and therefore applicable all over the world (Ziai 2016, 17).

### **Current Counter-Movements Challenging Northern Epistemic Dominance**

The prevailing knowledge order is indeed increasingly being challenged, as Venkatesh Vaditya rightly points out. In the African context, the decolonization movement starting off in 2015 has sparked intense public and academic debates on how to overcome the hegemony of Northern science (Ahmed 2019; Mwonzora 2019). There is a rich body of literature that deals with questions on how universities need to be reformed in order to counteract what Paulin Hountondji termed 'scientific extraversion' and dependence, and to produce knowledge for a self-determined transformation of African societies (Hountondji 2002; Mbembe 2016; Mungwini 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; see Dübgen and Skupien 2019 for an extraordinary synthesis of pertinent scholarship on the subject matter).

The Black Lives Matter Movement has spread across continents and triggered intense debates on racial discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation in all societal fields, including

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<sup>3</sup> Simply put, this reflects Mignolo's provocative description of an obviously internalised assumption in a colonial setting: "As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture" (Mignolo 2010, 160).

<sup>4</sup> The latter is included in a forthcoming publication in which I also provide a more elaborate engagement with de- and postcolonial scholarship (Koch forthcoming).

knowledge-based and knowledge-generating fields like science (“Black Lives Matter in ecology and evolution” 2020; “Why Black lives matter in science” 2020). Fuelled by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, these debates are now starting to spill over into the development sector. Up to now, they are taken up primarily by individuals engaged in cooperation, less by the organisations for which they work (Aid Re-imagined 2019; Currión 2020; Leon-Himmelstine and Pinet 2020).

## Conclusion

To what extent the counter movements challenging Northern epistemic dominance outlined above will induce not only a re-imagining of aid, but also help to make a new imaginary operative in practice remains to be seen. Based on my empirical research experiences and extensive engagement with different bodies of scholarship concerned with development cooperation from different perspectives, my prognosis is rather pessimistic as aid relations are inherently shaped by vested interests and a social imaginary of inequality that obstruct a radical transformation. However, current discourses emerging among academics and aid practitioners may indeed hold potential for at least triggering a substantial discussion and reflection of unjust epistemic practices in the realm of development and beyond.

Recently, [new transnational networks](#) were formed that address unequal knowledge relations in development research and practice. Scholars from different fields, including (intercultural) philosophy, Southern theory and de-/postcolonial studies, provide concrete visions how to achieve transnational politics characterised by solidarity and cognitive justice (de Sousa Santos 2018, 2007; Dübgen 2014). In Koch (2020a), I call for an interdisciplinary exchange between actors concerned with marginalisation and inclusiveness in science and knowledge-based fields. Such a dialogue may reveal mechanisms and practices that reproduce different forms of epistemic injustices across societal fields, and, by generating a deeper and more holistic understanding, help in transforming them.

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