

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

A COLLECTIVE VISION

Edited by James H. Collier

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Series Editor: James H. Collier is Associate Professor of Science and Technology in Society at Virginia Tech.

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Chapter 6

The Politics of Social Epistemology

Susan Dieleman, María G. Navarro,
and Elisabeth Simbürger

For the last twenty-five years, those with an interest in social epistemology sooner or later realized, perhaps with some amazement, that the label “social epistemology” actually includes two varieties. For the untrained eye, it may initially take some effort to figure out the differences between the research program, “social epistemology,” as set out by Steve Fuller twenty-five years ago in the journal *Social Epistemology* (founded 1987) and a monograph of the same title (1988), and Alvin Goldman’s research program, “social epistemology,” developed shortly thereafter, with the publication of *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999) and the journal *Episteme: A Journal of Individual and Social Epistemology* (founded 2004). However, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, these seemingly identical research programs are in fact worlds apart (Collin 2013; Remedios 2013; Vähämaa 2013). At base, the disputes between Fuller’s *sociological* social epistemology and Goldman’s *analytic* social epistemology seem to depend upon a diametrically opposed understanding of the role of normativity in social epistemology.

Fuller’s understanding of social epistemology stands in contrast to analytic social epistemology, which he characterizes as a

more ‘classical’ approach of starting from the individual knower who is ultimately concerned with whether her beliefs correspond to an epistemic standard that is presumed to exist independently of her own individual or collective activity—be that standard cast in supernatural (e.g., the Cartesian deity) or naturalistic (e.g., the Quinean physical environment) terms. (Fuller 2012, 276)

For Goldman, the debate is characterized somewhat differently. He writes,

According to one perspective, social epistemology is a branch of traditional epistemology that studies epistemic properties of individuals that arise from

their relations to others, as well as epistemic properties of groups or social systems. . . . A very different perspective would associate ‘social epistemology’ with movements in postmodernism, social studies of science, or cultural studies that aim to replace traditional epistemology with radically different questions, premises, or procedures. (Goldman 2010, 1)

Goldman goes on to suggest that analytic social epistemology is “real” epistemology, while Fuller’s version of social epistemology—which we will subsequently refer to as *sociological* social epistemology—is “not part of epistemology at all” (Goldman 2010, 1).

We have two main objectives in this chapter. The first is to suggest that social epistemologists tend to overlook or underplay the importance of the political dimensions of knowledge production. The second is to demonstrate the importance of politics to social epistemology using three cases: knowledge production in social movements, in political campaigns, and in the university. We will conclude by highlighting how the study and practice of social epistemology might look different were its political dimension to be more centrally located.

The political dimension of knowledge production is twofold. As social epistemologists motivated by the politics of knowledge production, we start from the assumption that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge or neutral knowledge producers. Knowledge always goes hand in hand with normative standpoints. On the other hand, the political dimension of knowledge production cannot just be confined to a normative position with regard to the knowledge we produce. It also involves taking normative positions in and around the contexts of knowledge production, such as the university, public policy, social movements, and think tanks, to name a few possible sites.

Of course, to suggest that social epistemology tends to ignore politics is not to say that neither the sociological nor the analytic version of social epistemology is altogether oblivious to the political dimensions of our knowledge practices. Analytic social epistemology, for example, has benefited from careful analyses of the role that power plays in the attribution of expertise and when one is justified in trusting another’s testimony, and efforts to develop and evaluate accounts of collective epistemic agency and responsibility are clearly political in nature, or at least in effect. Yet its tendency to neglect the fundamentally social nature of the *contexts* in which expertise, epistemic agency, and responsibility, and so on, are practiced undermines its own breadth of applicability. Vähämaa, for example, argues that, whereas sociological social epistemology dedicates itself to the study of socially shared beliefs and how they are understood by communities, for analytic social epistemologists, “‘real’ knowledge is constrained by propositional logic, which is derived from language and is constructed in social settings” (Vähämaa

2013, 36). Vähämaa criticizes this view for its tendency to leave aside the important role that social groups and social practices play in the construction and transformation of knowledge. As a result, one might be left wondering whether the notion of the social takes more than a merely decorative place in the description of the research program, as it clearly comes in second place after epistemology.

Of course, sociological social epistemology is more attentive to the normative dimension of knowledge production. As Fuller set out in his program in 1988, one of the key questions is how the pursuit of knowledge *ought* to be organized. The underlying thesis is that the production of knowledge is a normative endeavor. This perspective has been disputed ever since by science and technology studies of the Latourian kind that opts for a non-normative approach to knowledge production, as is well documented in Steve Fuller’s and Bruno Latour’s respective controversies (Barron 2003). However, despite being more normative than its analytic counterpart, and more attentive to the institutional structures that have determined the limits of knowledge historically, sociological social epistemology tends to pay insufficient attention to the role that power, domination, subordination, and oppression play in the historical creation of norms and practices and systems of knowledge. For example, sociological social epistemology has largely seemed to ignore the so-called postcolonial revolution in the social sciences and humanities (Bhambra 2007; Connell 2007) and has paid little attention to current discourses on the social sciences and humanities in a global context and the possibilities and challenges of crafting connected histories and sociologies that go beyond the separation between the so-called global North and South (Bhambra 2014; Keim et al. 2014). Moreover, one of the key deficiencies of sociological social epistemology and the work of its adherents is that empirical work remains to be the exception rather than the rule. This is not to overstate the importance of empirical work or to undermine the significance of theoretical work. Nevertheless, it is the neglect of the empirical dimension of social reality that finally bites social epistemology the hardest and occasionally reduces social epistemology’s selling point of being political to a mere banner. To put it differently, whereas sociological social epistemology emphasizes the importance of normativity in its research program and distinguishes itself from analytic social epistemology in this respect, there may still be some mileage to living up to this promise in a more encompassing way.

In what follows, we provide an account of three distinctly political issues that we think social epistemologists should pay attention to: the production of knowledge in social movements, in political campaigns, and in the university. Each of these sites is *political*, we suggest, insofar as it requires that social epistemologist engage with and take up a normative position regarding the site of knowledge production.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AS PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY: KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, SUSAN DIELEMAN

A political social epistemology is necessarily attentive to the institutional structures that make knowledge possible—or, more accurately, make some knowledges possible while rendering other knowledges impossible. Indeed, this seems to be the fundamental feature of institutions: they function as sites of legitimation. Disciplinary boundaries are determined according to what counts as the right sort of knowledge to count as a contribution. Disciplinary boundaries tend to be porous in reality, but they remain heavily policed nonetheless—one need only look at top-tier journals in a particular discipline (and I have my own discipline—philosophy—in mind) to see where these boundaries are drawn, and how institutions legitimate their own knowledges. However—and this is, of course, not an altogether novel claim—the danger that follows from institutionalization is that it tends toward the maintenance of the status quo, and reduces the chances of epistemic novelty.

To change knowledge—to shift the boundaries of what counts as knowledge and what does not, and to reconsider who counts as a knower and who does not—requires that we attend to the institutional settings in which knowledge is produced and legitimated. It is particularly incumbent on those who inhabit or populate institutions, if they are unsatisfied with the status quo (and I want to suggest that they have good reason to be unsatisfied), to challenge those very institutions. This might be a somewhat paradoxical demand—to ask that those whose work constitutes and is legitimated by an institution attend to the costs of that legitimation. But there are benefits to doing so. Indeed, if only certain knowledges and their related practices are considered legitimate within a disciplinary boundary, then one is justified in asking “What knowledges and practices are being left out? Is it the case that, simply by virtue being left out, they are neither knowledges nor practices of knowledge?” I suggest that the social epistemologist has a responsibility—an *epistemic* responsibility—to seek out alternative knowledges and practices of knowledge that are, because of the political practice of disciplinary boundary setting, not traditionally recognized.

In her 2012 paper “How Is This Paper Philosophy?” Kristie Dotson makes a similar point. She writes,

The environment of professional philosophy manifests symptoms of a culture of justification, i.e. a culture that privileges legitimation according to presumed commonly-held, univocally relevant justifying norms, which serves to amplify already existing practices of exceptionalism and senses of incongruence within the profession. (Dotson 2012, 6)

In other words, the discipline of philosophy legitimates its own knowledges and knowledge practices, thereby maintaining them. Dotson goes on to

recommend that a culture of praxis take the place of a culture of justification within the discipline of philosophy. A culture of praxis, she argues, would have the following features:

(1) value placed on seeking issues and circumstances pertinent to our living, where one maintains a healthy appreciation for the differing issues that will emerge as pertinent among different populations and (2) recognition and encouragement of multiple canons and multiple ways of understanding disciplinary validation. (Dotson 2012, 17)

I want to suggest that the culture of praxis Dotson recommends is similar to my own recommendation that social epistemology ought to be public philosophy.

A useful model here is the idea of theorist or philosopher as “rearguard,” a view that can be found in Linda Martín Alcoff’s reading of Enrique Dussel, whose philosophy of liberation, she suggests, “invokes the idea of philosophers as analytical transcribers or rear-guard theorists, not inventors or originators so much as those who give philosophical articulation to the ideas embedded in the praxis and lived experience of the activist oppressed” (Alcoff 2012, 62). Public philosophy, then, is best understood as the engagement in and contribution to activist groups on the part of philosophers, whose conceptual tools and analytical skills might serve the liberatory ends set out by others. This suggestion—that the social epistemologist is a public philosopher—amounts to asking the following question: Which social is the subject and the site of social epistemology? Social epistemologists should be among those leading the challenge to broaden and alter the social we, as social epistemologists, take as the topic for and site of our engagement. Social epistemology should be politicized; it should be public philosophy.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY: FACING THE CHALLENGE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, MARÍA G. NAVARRO

From the dynamics of electoral campaigns, it can be inferred that some of the most important producers of social meanings are the political parties and the leaders or candidates representing them. Each electoral campaign is different and each one conditions in a different way the type of strategy needed to establish the encounter between citizens’ knowledge (i.e., known information) and the information that is discussed in the candidates’ messages (i.e., new information).

The elementary classification of campaign types by Newman and Sheth (1987) can be useful to introduce the debate about the theoretical space of opportunity of social epistemology in the analysis of knowledge production in electoral campaigns. It is well known that Newman and Sheth distinguish up to four types of campaigns. These are the result of the combination of two

factors: the nature of the implication in the election (which can be high or low) and the degree of familiarity that the elector establishes with the candidates (the intensity of which varies from high to low levels). In my view, the very different kinds of campaigns that can take place, as well as the idea that there is a space of encounter between known and new information, defy the thesis according to which the beliefs of the electors correspond to standards that exist independently of individual or collective action. The electors experience not just the very different kinds of pressures that operate during a campaign (e.g., institutional pressure, pressures derived from the human natural disposition to influence and being influenced), they also experience diverse degrees of implication and they can believe that certain elections may be decisive for their future, even when they have a scarce knowledge of the leaders.

The question I would like to address is simple: if we take into account that for the analytic social epistemology defended by Goldman (2011, 11–37) it is not enough to examine the social contexts of believing, as it is necessary to illuminate the conditions of epistemic success or failure, then how could this dichotomic model of analysis be applied to the effects produced by the electoral campaigns as they are classified by Lazarsfeld (1968) (e.g., the campaigns would activate the political predispositions of the electors, they would reinforce the vote intentions, and in some cases they could produce processes of conversion or change in vote intention) without eliminating *de facto* the phenomenon that one intends to analyze?

My impression is that when we suppose that there might be a level of epistemic analysis independent from the individual or collective activity that is being examined, we only obtain the annulation of social reality as a result because we take it to a simple diagnosis about its supposed epistemic failure and/or success. It seems reasonable to think that a political conception of social epistemology is needed to analyze the political attitudes and predispositions of the citizens during the periods of electoral campaigns. It can be said that in those moments of institutional tension there are variables that determine the vote orientation that do not depend only on known information but also on information that one acquires in the process. And that the phenomenon of collective epistemic agency cannot be evaluated without assuming that it develops and configures itself in a political context. The type of communication that takes place during electoral campaigns defies the analytic conception of social epistemology. It would be even necessary to eliminate the concepts coined by political science to finally capture effects produced during the development of an electoral campaign (Brady et al. 2009) that do not contradict the normative dimension as it is assumed by analytic social epistemology.

But the limitations of social epistemology in general (i.e., in its sociological and analytical projections) when applied to the field of politics and,

particularly, when applied to the complex processes of public opinion conformation and to the production of knowledge during election campaigns, are similar in the case of big data, a fundamental promise in the future economic revolution as concluded from the reports of International Data Corporation (Schmarzo 2013; Ohlhorst 2012), and a challenge in epistemic terms. The world produces more and more information, via more devices, in more sites and using more apps. According to the European Union, every minute enough information is generated to be recorded in 360,000 DVDs. How would those unstructured data affect the processes of belief acquisition, and that of the public opinion conformation, when “putting some brain to them” is achieved? A challenge for social epistemology is to explain how and who will transform big data into knowledge during political campaigns, and what will be, in each case, the political consequences of the new form of epistemic agency that dawns on the horizon.

SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY'S GAZE AT ITSELF: KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE UNIVERSITY, ELISABETH SIMBÜRGER

Even within sociological social epistemology itself, the calling for normativity with regard to knowledge production does not always seem to translate into more tangible, political realities. It is a worthwhile endeavor shedding a bit more light on the question of social epistemology's dedication to politics on the ground, focusing on the university as a workplace and as a site of neoliberalism. Are we really political? Do we engage with the materiality of what knowledge production is about?

For this purpose of gazing at ourselves, I will turn to Alvin Gouldner and his work on reflexivity in the social sciences. In *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, Alvin Gouldner (1970) analyzes the intertwining of social theory and practice with the political surroundings at the time in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly to C. Wright Mills, he suggests that being a sociologist is a life-encompassing activity that cannot be discarded at the doors of a university. As such, Gouldner already presents his social epistemology business card. The process of awareness of ourselves in our totality in relation to our research and the outside world is at the core of Gouldner's Reflexive Sociology program. What makes his work so distinctive is that it is an epistemological position with practical and political implications. For him, critique can never be a static undertaking and needs to be continually revisited (Gouldner 1970) as he has shown in his work about the growing convergence between Functionalism and Marxism. Being a Marxist himself, he accused Marxist sociologists of being in a static relationship with their theory, of not living up to their strong theoretical claims of critique and not questioning the

foundations of their thought (Gouldner 1970). In fact, Gouldner saw open-mindedness for hostile information as a strategy that prevents us from getting lost in dogmatic thought. As should be clear by now, Gouldner can be seen as a true social epistemologist.

Without doubt representatives of Fullerian social epistemology have repeatedly shown that they are open-minded to seemingly hostile information, often playing devil's advocate (Fuller 2007; Fuller and Lipinska 2014). However, there seems to be less documentation for social epistemology's commitment in conceptual terms—speaking of Fullerian social epistemology as a collective—to politics within the university on a global scale and against the prevalent conditions of knowledge production within higher education. Academic capitalism is everywhere (Münch 2011). At the heart of the transformation of the university is a transformation of its labor relations and, as a consequence, a transformation of the kinds of knowledge that we produce (Roggero 2011).

My general concern is not that social epistemology's normativity with regard to these quests was totally absent. Yet, there is a tendency in the social sciences and humanities—and this also applies to this collective—to not name things or to disguise their materiality by choosing alternative labels. However, labeling does have a performative effect after all. The labeling of things becomes part of the materiality of an object after a while. “Social practices” and “producing the social” have become the new buzzwords of our time (Ariztía 2012; Camic et al. 2011). As argued elsewhere, as important the latest “turn to practice” is to study the production of the social sciences, it seems to systematically leave aside one dimension that is crucial in the shaping of practices both in the social sciences and in the sciences: the labor relations of academic knowledge production (Simbürger 2014).

Of course there are exceptions. To take an example Stephen Norrie, from the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, enriched the debate on academic work by providing us with creative approaches on how to form an academic collective in spite of institutional pressure to publish individually in A-rated journals, constraints that are especially prevalent for early career academics in precarious working conditions (2011).

This is not to say that the academic work carried out within the collective is not an act of resistance of some sort. Being cynical, one could argue that taking the time to write a short piece for the online collective and thus having less time left to write for an A-rated journal, could in times of pressure for output already be considered as a postmodern act of solidarity, albeit in quite disguised ways. However, naming and labeling—talking about academic work—is the first step. Perhaps every now and then it is necessary to think and act beyond the neoliberal university.

CONCLUSION

To the extent that *analytical* social epistemology remains mired in debates that have characterized more traditional approaches to epistemology, its political dimension remains underdeveloped. On the other hand, whereas *sociological* social epistemology is very explicit about its normative position, its focus is limited to formal sites of knowledge production rather than informal sites, thereby ignoring sites of social epistemology other than universities and think tanks. In this chapter, we have recommended that this political dimension be made more central to the study and practice of social epistemology. Moreover, if social epistemology is to live up to its political commitments, it is important to prevent its becoming an inward-looking group, remaining open toward schools of thought and ideas that may not necessarily be called social epistemology but may yet reflect like-minded ideas and approaches.

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Part II

EXTENDING CONCEPTIONS OF KNOWING