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Echo Chambers, Ignorance and Domination

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My aim in this paper is to engage with C. Thi Nguyen’s characterization of the echo chamber and to propose two things. First, I argue that a proper reading of his concept of echo chamber should make use of the notion of ignorance in the form of a structural epistemic insensitivity. My main contention is that ignorance as a substantive structural practice accounts for the epistemically deleterious effects of echo chambers. Second, I propose that from the talk of ignorance we should be able to see echo chambers in terms of their more harmful impacts in our daily lives. To do that, I argue that we should think of echo chambers as tools to promote hermeneutical domination. If my representation of Nguyen’s concept is accurate, I believe we can see some important theoretical consequences stemming from the way Nguyen understands it.

Keywords: echo chamber; ignorance; epistemic injustice; domination.

**1 - Introduction**

Discussions about the political character of our epistemic practices have been on the forefront of a good part of recent work in social epistemology. With such prominence comes also a plethora of new and improved concepts to describe and explain when and why these practices go wrong. A recent work has drawn attention for conceptualizing the phenomenon of the *echo chamber*. My aim here is to engage with C. Thi Nguyen’s (2020) characterization of such phenomenon and to propose two things. First, I argue that a proper reading of his concept of echo chamber should make use of the notion of *ignorance* in the form of a structural epistemic insensitivity. My main contention is that ignorance as a substantive structural practice accounts for the epistemically deleterious effects of echo chambers*.* Second, I propose that from the talk of ignorance we should be able to see echo chambers in terms of their more harmful impacts in our daily lives. To do that, I argue that we should think of echo chambers as tools to promote *hermeneutical domination.* If my representation of Nguyen’s concept is accurate, I believe we can see some important theoretical consequences stemming from the way Nguyen understands it.

For Nguyen, an echo chamber is an ‘epistemic community’ (2020, 146). That is, an echo chamber is a community within which members share belief-forming methods, reasoning tools, informational resources, etc. One might argue that it is by being member of such communities and by engaging with other members, that we get to know most of the things we know about the world. Sandy Goldberg (2011), for example, has argued for what he calls a *division of epistemic labor*, where knowledge tasks are distributed among members of a community, on whom we depend, directly or diffusely, to know the things we know. One directly depends upon other members of a community to know when the epistemic properties of one’s doxastic attitudes are sensitive to other individual member’s epistemic perspectives. Traditional cases of testimony would be examples of this kind of dependence. On the other hand, one diffusely depends on other members when these properties are conditioned to the quality of the epistemic practices of a community as a whole (2011, p. 120). So, it seems­ reasonable to conclude that membership to an epistemic community might be a good thing – although if it is a good thing, it is good conditional upon the proper functioning of such dependency features.

Again, an echo chamber, in Nguyen’s view, is an epistemic community. But it is also a community where relations of dependence are exclusionary by design. In an echo chamber, epistemic inputs from non-members are actively rejected or excluded in favor of internal inputs (inputs from members). This exclusion is done by the systematic manipulation and discrediting of outside epistemic sources (2020, 141). Thus, echo chambers are epistemic communities – or ‘social epistemic structures’ – in which members are convinced to distrust non-members and in which, consequently, ‘other relevant voices have been actively discredited’ (2020, 142).

Some examples of such a phenomenon, according to Nguyen, are of climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers. These groups work as structures of epistemic exclusion in which members are isolated, or isolate themselves, from outside epistemic sources. This isolation is made possible by the structural and systematic manipulation of the dependency features of outside epistemic sources on some particular matter through the undermining of their epistemic credentials. The result is a scenario in which members of the echo chamber become over-dependent on themselves as sources of beliefs, information and knowledge and, on the account of that over-dependency, become highly resistant to counter-evidence coming from the outside. This behavior can isolate the community and each of its members in both an epistemic sense and a political sense, by reinforcing an ideological segregation between those inside and outside the social epistemic structure (2020, 142). Not only can those outside be thought to simply lack knowledge, but they can also be seen as being in an adversarial political position.

Take the case of climate change denying. Usually those who are adamant in this denial reject any possibility of being wrong or being convinced otherwise. Because of that, they isolate themselves from reason-giving practices that aim to counter the convictions they hold. They tend to paint climate change scientists as people on whom one cannot depend if one wants to know the truth about the climate. One can only depend, by that logic, on those who share the same views about the matter. Thus, those who disagree or those who try to challenge the isolated and resistant views about climate change are not only seen as irrational, but are also seen as adversaries in a political battle for the most apt image of the environment.

Perhaps because of the division of epistemic labor we could see that is natural for us, as epistemic peers in a community, to trust each other – particularly to trust those near us, geographically or epistemically. What makes this dependency problematic, however, is when such relation takes place within a ‘*superstructure* of discredit and authority’ (Nguyen 2020, 142, emphasis added), where the epistemic credentials of members are unwarrantedly amplified and the epistemic credentials of non-members are unwarrantedly undermined. Echo chambers, then, would be a way of relying ‘parasitically’ on our relations of epistemic trust and dependency, by creating ‘a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members’ (Nguyen 2020, 146-149).

Echo chambers, on Nguyen’s view, operate through the manipulation of the epistemic credentials of members and non-members, by forging markers of trust that are connected to the membership of a group. Thus, by forcing a separation between those who can and those who cannot be trusted, these echo chambers also manipulate the type of evidence accepted for a particular inquiry. Testimonial evidence from non-members, for instance, is less than acceptable, given that they are seen as unreliable or dishonest about the subject matter (Nguyen 2020, 146). This behaviour undermines the credibility of non-members, establishing a gap in epistemic competence between them and members of the group, isolating members from outside epistemic inputs[[1]](#footnote-1).

It seems correct to assume that an echo chamber, in Nguyen’s account, involves instances of credibility misplacements, group-based epistemic exclusions and cognitive behaviours directed toward some group’s interests. And all of this seems to be something near and dear to some recent discussions in social epistemology. Nguyen himself offers this observation. In particular, he thinks his view of echo chambers is compatible with both Miranda Fricker’s work on *testimonial injustice[[2]](#footnote-2)* and Charles Mills’ work on *white ignorance[[3]](#footnote-3)*. He thinks this compatibility is due to the fact that echo chambers can also be thought of as tools to promote social oppression. Given that echo chambers work by promoting the systematic distrusting of outsiders, it is easy to see it as a natural vehicle of systematic epistemic injustices and structural ignorance (2020, 149). But he argues that echo chambers are independent of these other social epistemic phenomena. His reasoning is that although being ‘excellent tools to maintain, reinforce and expand power through epistemic control,’ it is not required that they are used for those ends. For him, an echo chamber doesn’t need a political or oppressive background to work, given that it is possible for it to be maintained by oppressed people or for it to exist in apolitical contexts. In summary, testimonial injustice and white ignorance can occur within and alongside an echo chamber, but are not equivalent to it.

I don’t think Nguyen’s position on this is completely satisfactory. Much more could and should be said about the way these phenomena relate to each other. In what follows, I aim to explore this connection and to propose two ways of improving our understanding of the phenomenon at hand. First, I want to argue that while we can think of echo chambers separately from *white* ignorance, I do not think we can say the same for their relation to the *structural ignorance* that underlies this and other types of ignorance based on dominant/privileged perspectives (such as *male*, *western*, *cis* ignorance, for example). My point here is that this underlying sense of ignorance doesn’t necessarily imply social oppression – although it facilitates it – so it cannot be the target of his response. In section 2, I will provide an account of structural ignorance and explore its connection with echo chambers. I believe such connection is manifested via what Lauren Woomer (2019) calls an *agential epistemic insensitivity*. Second, I will argue that although echo chambers and testimonial injustices can be thought of as separate, by seeing the phenomena of echo chambers through the lenses of structural ignorance we can see how easy it is for them to evolve to a scenario of epistemic injustice. By discussing the phenomenon of *hermeneutical domination*, I propose we extrapolate Nguyen’s formulation to its more damaging social and political consequences. In Section 3, I will defend this idea and present an example in support of it.

# 2 – Echo chambers and structural ignorance

‘Ignorance’ can mean different things to different people. It can mean a certain trivial not-knowing. For instance, to say that one is ignorant of how many grains of sand there are on a particular beach or to say that one is ignorant of the answer to a complex, 1500 pages-long mathematical derivation, just means that one does not know. The type of ignorance that I’m interested here, however, is the one that has its origin, maintenance or cultivation connected to social epistemic structures[[4]](#footnote-4).

This social epistemic type of ignorance has received interesting and varied accounts recently, especially in terms of its scope and relation to group identities and group interests[[5]](#footnote-5). Instead of reproducing all these accounts here, I aim to find a view of ignorance that possesses what I think are the main features underlying the various accounts of ignorance in the social epistemology literature. The working notion that I want to arrive at is of *structural ignorance*. When talking about what he calls active ignorance, José Medina says that such ignorance

occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defense mechanisms, an ignorance that is not easy to undo and correct, for this requires retraining – the reconfiguration of epistemic attitudes and habits – as well as social change (Medina 2013, 39).

In a general sense, a person is actively ignorant if her not-knowing can be attributed to her as consequence of a vicious epistemic behaviour on her part. For Medina, the convergence of epistemic vices, such as arrogance, laziness and close-mindedness, can contribute a great deal to one’s ignorance. A person who ‘presumes to know all there is to know’ about some subject matter, who lacks the necessary ‘effort and motivation to find out more’ about this matter and who lacks the ‘openness to the relevance and importance’ of different experiences and perspectives is not only ignorant in the trivial sense of lacking knowledge of a particular subject, but is also ignorant in a more active way (Medina 2013, 39).

If we understand ignorance as a vicious not-knowing in this way, it would not be a stretch to say that active ignorance is, as Linda Alcoff puts it, a ‘*substantive* epistemic practice in itself’ (2007, 39, emphasis in the original). This means that to conceive of ignorance as active is to conceive it as being part of the epistemic behaviour of an individual or a group of agents. Active ignorance, then, seems to be involved in most of the specific accounts of ignorance in the current literature. What Charles Mills calls ‘white ignorance’ or what Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. calls ‘willful hermeneutical ignorance’[[6]](#footnote-6), for example, fit the notion of active ignorance as a substantive epistemic practice in this way. None of the authors who discuss the theme of ignorance in this social epistemic sense, however, thinks of ignorance as the result of a mere individualistic failing. All of them are concerned about the structural nature of this phenomenon. They are interested in how vicious epistemic behaviours are *rooted* in social epistemic structures of marginalization and exclusion. And I think that spelling out more clearly the structural or socially promoted/supported nature of these behaviours helps us understand what is really going on at the core of what Nguyen calls echo chambers.

The idea here is that the phenomenon of ignorance, although manifested by vicious agents, is actively produced and maintained by the social structures to which the agents belong and take part in. In her discussion of active ignorance, Lauren Woomer (2019) gives us what I think to be an apt way to understand the structural or socially supported nature of this phenomenon. Woomer is concerned with the type of ignorance manifested by some white North Americans who seem to nakedly ignore the evidence pointing to a racial pattern in the police killings of black people in the US. According to her, their ignorance manifests in their failing to change their epistemic perspectives about racial relations and the relationship between policing and marginalized communities. Such failing, she argues, is caused by a failure to properly use the epistemic tools available to them, either by not attending to the available evidence on the matter or by attending to it but failing to modify their beliefs on the matter accordingly. In the first case, in what Woomer calls an ‘attention failure,’ the agent could attend to the relevant evidence on the matter, but does not. Although there is widespread evidence of systematic and racialized police brutality in the US, one prefers rather to ignore it or to divert the attention elsewhere – to conspiratorial thinking, for example, that of the Black Lives Matter movement as violent and as a threat to police officers in the US (2019, 77). By doing that they avoid engaging with data that are counter-evidential to one’s doxastic commitments. In the second case, in what Woomer calls an ‘uptake failure,’ the agent engages only superficially with the evidence: attending, but being non-responsive to it. In this case, one fails to respond to the force of the evidence before one by refusing to understand the epistemic significance of what is before one – by interpreting the evidence as invalid, either because of the content or because of its carrier. Both failures, according to Woomer, express instances of active ignorance. They are instances in which

even when an ignorant subject encounters evidence contrary to their false beliefs, they avoid changing their views. Hence there’s reason to think that actively ignorant agents are somehow participating in their own ignorance. (Woomer 2019, 74)

But, as we saw earlier, these are not mere individualistic failures. They involve what Woomer calls a ‘socially supported agential insensitivity’, an insensitivity to the available evidence that is ‘a product of the complex interactions between an agent’s individual features and their social world’ (2019, 73;79). In the case of the white North Americans, Woomer argues, the ignorance is enabled and encouraged by social structures, in order to preserve particular social epistemic arrangements (2019, 73).

Charles Mills, in his ‘White Ignorance’ (2007), is concerned with a proper characterization of what he calls a ‘*structural group-based* miscognition’ (2007, 13, emphasis added). One of the main examples Mills uses to illustrate such a phenomenon is the fictional case of Amasa Delano, the protagonist of Herman Melville’s novel ‘Benito Cereno’, who, when boarding a slave ship that has been taken by an uprising of the captives, fails to ‘see’ things as they are. He fails to realize that an uprising is happening and tries to find alternative explanations for the strange behaviour of the blacks and whites on the ship. According to Mills’s take on the passage, the ‘white delusion of racial superiority’ (2007, 19) makes the possibility of such an impressive feat from ‘inferior blacks’ unimaginable. Consequently, it makes Delano unable to know what is happening on the ship, to the extent that obvious explanations to the captives’ behaviour and powerful evidence pointing to the fact of their revolt are ignored in favour of far-fetched interpretations of the world before him.

According to Mills, the ‘miscognition’ just described is a particular type of ignorance rooted in white racial domination, either in the form of ‘straightforward racist motivation’ or ‘more interpersonal *social-structural causation*’ (2007, 21, emphasis added); it is what he calls *white ignorance*. Mills argues that white ignorance is best conceived as a cognitive tendency, or a doxastic disposition, that will be responsive to differential group identity intersections and socialization, and also to patterns of social power dynamics and ideological hegemony (2007, 22). But the ‘white’ qualification in ‘white ignorance’ aims to point to patterns of belief-formation that are influenced by one or more relations of racial domination and subordination, especially in the US. Those patterns compose what he calls ‘white normativity’. Woomer draws partially from Mills’s work to present her notion of ‘*socially supported ignorance’*. In her main example, white North Americans exhibit what Mills would call ‘a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (…) producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.’ (Mills 1997, 18) So, white ignorance is both active ignorance and structural ignorance, manifested in a socially supported agential insensitivity to the available evidence.

Both Woomer’s and Mills’s examples serve to identify at least two things in the working concept of ignorance that I am interested here. Each involves a structural and an individual aspect of it. On the one hand, we have agents being resistant to counter-evidential stimuli, either by viciously failing to engage adequately with the available evidence or failing to even ‘see’ the evidence before them. On the other hand, we have agents being resistant to such stimuli *because* of ‘social suppressions of pertinent knowledge’ (Mills, 2007, 21) or pertinent knowers in a way that is beneficial to the preservation of one group’s political and social dominance, or that is at least beneficial to the preservation of the status quo.

Social suppression of pertinent knowledge can be achieved, for example, through the ‘selection of certain voices against others, selection in and selection out’ (Mills 2007, 24). In the case of white ignorance, this selection can happen, for example, when there is a ‘white refusal’ – or a refusal rooted in white normativity – of considering potential testimonies from marginalized groups. By selecting who can and who cannot contribute to relevant epistemic practices, by excluding epistemic inputs from the outside (where ‘outside’ here means ‘outside’ one’s particular hegemonic ideological outlook), agents shield themselves from pertinent knowledge about the world and marginalized experiences[[7]](#footnote-7).

With this notion of ignorance in mind, I now want to move on to connecting this phenomenon and the phenomenon of the echo chamber that Nguyen discusses. An agent is actively ignorant if they behave, epistemically, in a way that makes their belief-forming processes viciously resistant to counter-evidence. This resistance is not a mere individual resistance to facts and opinions one finds unpleasant. An agent is actively ignorant if they form their beliefs responding to an epistemic superstructure of vicious behaviours that sifts away relevant evidence to the subject matter at hand. The ignorance generated by such behaviour is due to a social structure that directs people away from opposing evidence, either by making it ‘invisible’, as it is in the case described by Mills, or by making it ineffective, as in the cases described by Woomer. Thus, ignorance in the relevant sense is always contextual[[8]](#footnote-8), always dependent on the particular relationship between the agent and their environment – or between them and their epistemic community.

What I have in mind here is the idea that Nguyen’s echo chambers involve practices of ignorance, involve what I’m calling *socially supported active ignorance*, or plain and simple *structural ignorance*. If we think again about the case of climate change deniers, in comparison to Woomer’s examples, we can see some support to this claim. Remember that the example of climate change deniers had as its main force the idea that the deniers’ epistemic dispositions are such that any reason-giving activity coming from the people who disagree with them is rejected, discredited and painted as untrustworthy. In so doing, climate change deniers isolate themselves from relevant evidence on the subject matter they are interested in. To reinforce this epistemic isolation, they reinforce ideological separation between them and those who disagree with them (Nguyen 2020, 141). The ideological separation between the two groups[[9]](#footnote-9) is used to justify the deniers’ pre-emptive rejection of the validity of the climate change believers’ testimonial evidence on the matter. The result of this is a group that fails to attend to relevant evidence because they fail to ‘see’ it as evidence in the first place.

What makes this case an echo chamber, and not a mere epistemic bubble[[10]](#footnote-10), for example, is in part the fact that this is a social epistemic superstructure of discredit that creates, maintains or enforces this epistemically vicious behaviour. That is, Nguyen’s echo chambers necessitate that there be socially supported miscognition practices in place. In fact, it is the fact that such practices must be in place that allows Nguyen to defend the claim that sometimes an agent within an echo chamber might not even be completely at fault for their bad epistemic habits. One can, for example, be raised in a community with the features of an echo chamber. In that case, one’s epistemic history is tainted by practices of miscognition, and so one would not bear full responsibility for the way one’s beliefs end up being. For what is worth, one can say that such a person is rational insofar as they follow the only epistemic paths they know of (2020, 144). Thus, something structural *needs* to be in operation.

What is in operation here seems to be the same thing that operates in Woomer’s example. Both here and there, we have socially supported strategic discrediting being applied to evidence and evidential practices that could potentially disturb some of the agent’s central doxastic commitments. A climate change denier who is engaged in a community of climate change denial will reject external inputs on the matter not only because they are afraid that their doxastic commitments will be disturbed. They do so because this is what is *determined by their membership to their community*. There is a social force in the community that determines what is and what is not good epistemic practice. These practices are essential to maintain the relevant features of the group and its insulation from external disturbances.

So, if the above is right, echo chambers, in order to reinforce their social structures and their arrangement of trust (Nguyen 2020, 150), need their members to behave in an actively ignorant way, in the sense of actively viciously rejecting outside epistemic contributions, failing to engage with the relevant evidence and/or to update their beliefs accordingly. As I mentioned earlier, ignorance here is not the mere lack of propositional knowledge. For one to be ignorant in the sense discussed by Medina, Mills and Woomer, one’s lack of knowledge must be caused by a social epistemic structure guided by group-related interests. What such ignorance amounts to is not the simple absence of relevant knowledge, but a general epistemically deleterious behaviour of rejecting epistemic contributions. The person who is ignorant, in this sense, might end up with a small amount of true beliefs, but by rejecting external epistemic inputs, they will pre-empt relevant new knowledge – that is, they might stagnate their body of knowledge. This person can be called ignorant not because they don’t know anything, but because they could know even more if they were open to external inputs – even to false external inputs, given that the confrontation with false statements might’ve called for a strengthening of their doxastic commitments in order to counter the falsity of these inputs. In that case, ignorance doesn’t necessitate complete lack of knowledge.

This way of discussing ignorance puts an important emphasis on the group-ladenness of such phenomenon. If one wants to understand how questions of hegemony, ideology and domination affect how we come to believe and know things, Mills argues, we have to think about agents as members of their social groups, vulnerable to their influence on their cognitive lives. As Alvin Goldman puts it (1999, 4-5), and Mills agrees (2007, 16), work in social epistemology needs not to ‘restrict itself to believers taken singly. It often focuses on some sort of group entity... and examines the spread of information or misinformation across that group’s membership’. *Group membership*, or socially (or group) supported ‘miscognition’ then, is central to Mills’s account of ignorance and it also seems central to Nguyen’s account of echo chambers.

My aim so far was to draw attention to what I see to be involved in Nguyen’s conception of an echo chamber. The emphasis on the deleterious epistemic features of the behaviour determined by group membership leads us to think more carefully on why some echo chambers pose a danger to the healthy functioning of our epistemic commons. In the remainder of this paper, I discuss one way in which echo chambers, through its operation, can actively help to deepen the marginalisation of resistant outsiders.

# 3 – Echo chambers and hermeneutical domination

As I briefly gestured before, I think Nguyen is right in saying that his conception of echo chamber is independent from that of testimonial injustice. That is, one can present an echo chamber that exhibits some of the main features of what has been traditionally understood as testimonial injustice, or even as epistemic injustice more broadly – resistance to counterevidence, structural group-related epistemic exclusions, etc. – without having to commit oneself to the idea that what is going on in the particular social structure is one or more types of epistemic injustices.

Although these are similar features, for something to be an epistemic injustice, it is not enough that one individual or group behaves in this resistant or exclusionary way. To be part of what constitutes an epistemic injustice, in the traditional sense, an epistemic practice needs to be rooted either in a systematic identity prejudice or in a structural hermeneutical marginalization (Fricker 2007, 155). The systematic and structural nature of such injustices is usually understood as implying some pernicious tracking across different areas of one’s life and some other pragmatic consequences, related to the way members of a particular social identity are seen and treated overall and not only in terms of their epistemic credentials. It seems fair to say that climate change scientists, while having their epistemic inputs rejected by climate change deniers, can be rejected with no particular harms to themselves as a group. One can be rejected as an epistemic source in this way and continue to live one’s life normally, without having one’s authority further doubted in one’s daily life and without suffering any practical consequence of such rejection.

While I do accept Nguyen’s brief point on the conceptual independence, I think a lot more could and should be said about the way these phenomena can be related. I argue that we should prudentially always think about the deeper political-epistemic consequences of the exclusionary practices maintained by members of an echo chamber. Since one could argue that echo chambers are very common in times of political polarization[[11]](#footnote-11), it seems only right to investigate this particular aspect. I’m not saying that Nguyen doesn’t engage with such an aspect[[12]](#footnote-12). But I think that the social epistemic problems of everyday life, which are central to belief polarization, for example, can be thought of as important and dangerous aspects of the ways these social epistemic structures are set up and maintained and, in some cases, are essential to their thriving.

I want to propose, then, that in some cases, echo chambers are not only marked by a socially supported failure to know something or to engage with the right evidence in favour of something. They can be also ways of perniciously shutting dissident voices down by a radical undermining of their epistemic worth. The way they do that is by monopolizing epistemic understandings about the world and about social practices and experiences.

Amandine Catala (2015) has a concept for such behaviour. She calls it a *hermeneutical domination*, a third type of epistemic injustice, one not considered by Miranda Fricker. It is the intersection of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices and it occurs when a social or political majority group ‘unilaterally imposes a collective understanding of a practice that it is impossible for the minority to contest in any meaningful sense’ (2015, 427-428)[[13]](#footnote-13). The minority group becomes hermeneutically dominated not by the fact that they are unable to make sense of these social practices, but because, although they can see and understand them clearly, their testimony is dismissed by the majority that treats the minority as epistemically untrustworthy. The minority suffers an undue credibility deficit and

(...) [a]s a result of this denial of equal epistemic status or credibility deficit, the minority is deprived of the opportunity to contribute to the collective hermeneutical resource or the pool of descriptive labels used to characterize or make sense of that social practice or experience. Its experience or description of the practice thereby remains collectively misunderstood. That is, the minority suffers an undue intelligibility deficit due to hermeneutical marginalization: this is hermeneutical injustice. (...) Consequently, the minority is subjected to a public discourse on that social practice or experience that is shaped by putatively collective understandings that are in fact wholly formulated and imposed by the majority. That is, the minority suffers what I call ‘hermeneutical domination’, the result of the intersection of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. (Catala 2015, 428)

Let me put the concept to use to see if we can capture both a clear expression of Catala’s notion and the ways this domination can be manifested in Nguyen’s echo chambers. In 2018, 55,13% of the Brazilian electorate voted to elect the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro as the new president. It is known[[14]](#footnote-14), by now, that lies and manipulations, mainly through online media, played an important part in advancing Bolsonaro’s platform (or lack thereof, since he was seen by some pundits as a candidate without proposals, who played directly into fears and traumas of the citizens). The type of misinformation that was shared by *bolsonaristas* on *bolsonarista* social media included silly lies, such as the lie that the opposition candidates wanted to impose the use, by toddlers, of erotic baby bottles – that is, baby bottles that supposedly had penis-shaped teats – in a ‘gay plan’ to turn the toddlers themselves gay[[15]](#footnote-15). But this seemly minor misinformation was part of a more serious and acted upon conspiratorial thought, including the conspiracy that left-wing parties wanted to impose a ‘gender ideology’ on Brazilian children. The alleged aim of the ‘gender ideology’ was to demolish ‘traditional values’ by imposing the notion that there are no defined genders or that everyone is gay. The conspiracy also included the claim that the left wanted to make it illegal to be a straight cisgender man in Brazil.

This ‘gender ideology’ conspiracy was not only considerably prominent during the election, but was invoked by Bolsonaro himself during numerous interviews and speeches in Congress beginning several years before his election. During the campaign, he managed to amplify the conspiracy by lifting a children’s book to the camera during an interview – a book that had in its cover the drawing of a kid examining their genitalia – claiming that that was the book the left wanted all kindergarten teachers to use. It turned out that the book was a Swiss body-awareness book and had nothing to do with left politics in Brazil and that its contents didn’t aim at teaching ‘sex positions’ or ‘gender ideology’ to kids, as it was claimed. And even though Bolsonaro was lying, he never admitted that he was, nor did the largest TV company in the country, which conducted the interview, say anything about it. Thus, the conspiracy theory of the ‘gender ideology’ remained strong and echoing within *bolsonarista* circles, shaping a number of discussions, even within academia.

I think we can explain the discourse around ‘gender ideology’ the same way we did with the case of climate change deniers. People who are critical of what they see as ‘gender ideology’ do so within a *social epistemic structure of exclusion*, of socially supported epistemic insensitivity. Isolation from external inputs on the matter (where the left is the relevant external source here) is enforced and essential for the structural ignorance in place and for the maintenance of their ideology. As we saw, members of such social epistemic structure become resistant to counterevidence and over-dependent on the ways in which their peers (in this case, other *bolsonaristas*) think about the matter. When combined, this isolation, insensitivity and over-dependency reinforce ideological segregation between *bolsonaristas* and left-wingers.

However, although we can characterize the *bolsonarista* echo chamber in this way by drawing on the same elements we used to present the climate change deniers, I believe there are important differences in the way these social epistemic structures manifest themselves in actuality. The *bolsonarista* echo chamber works not only by undermining the epistemic credentials of left-wing people (and of marginalized LGBTQ+ people, who, whether or not they are on the left, are seen as promoters of gender ideology if they dare to disagree with the conspiracy theory). This echo chamber also imposes ‘ready-made narratives to explain away evidence’ (Woomer 2019, 87). But it does that by imposing, as a literal or political majority, a monopoly on the ways we should see activism for gender and sexual rights in the country. In the ‘gender ideology case’, it imposes collective understandings on the matter, sometimes by the force of the law[[16]](#footnote-16).

The fact that the president is in on the conspiracy makes it more salient that we are dealing with a case of hermeneutical domination. Even though there are a lot of researchers working to understand and to aptly conceptualize things such as gender, sexual orientations and rights, the dominant discourse that comes specifically from within the government, that echoes in the *bolsonarista* circles, and which can be thought of as the sheer representation of a majority, is one that puts these researchers and their work in the realm of sexual deviance and of being a threat to children and society as a whole. This is different from what is happening to climate change deniers, at least in Brazil – although one can find evidence that this might be changing. Climate change deniers don’t have the power, *yet*, to criminalize epistemic practices such as climate change science. On the other hand, the harms of epistemic domination, as it is the case with other epistemic injustices, are both epistemic and practical. By imposing a monolithic view on gender and sexuality, the *bolsonarista* echo chamber excludes divergent ideas and block contestation, either by the force of law or by the force of violence – by its capacity of ‘interfering arbitrarily and with impunity’ into the practices of understanding important social phenomena (Catala 2015, 428).

If the above is right, we should think of echo chambers and their social epistemic structural features in terms of their more harmful impacts in our daily lives. One can argue that climate change deniers’ echo chambers are harmful, but in a restricted sense. Maybe they are harmful to children who are bombarded by their misguided ideas via YouTube videos. That’s not a small harm, of course. But it is not an echo chamber in its more harmful manifestation. I think that, in their most harmful manifestations, Nguyen’s echo chambers involve not only structural ignorance, but involve also hermeneutical domination. That is, they involve socially supported agential insensitivity, the undermining of the outside sources’ epistemic credentials and the exclusion of these sources from the pool of hermeneutical contributions. More importantly, they impose, by the force of their political power, putatively collective understandings of practices and experiences in a way that makes non-members highly vulnerable to such imposition.

This should suffice to show that, although we can concede Nguyen’s point that the talk of echo chambers can be independent, conceptually, from the talk of epistemic injustices, we should embrace a claim that says that it would be important to us to think of these concepts as working together, so we can clearly grasp the reach of the epistemically deleterious effects of echo chambers. This would make the talk of echo chambers more politically and epistemically informative; and, at the same time, it would enrich discussions of epistemic injustices by adding new elements to be analysed in terms of such phenomenon.

# Concluding remarks

In this paper, I meant to argue for two things. First, I wanted to show that C. Thi Nguyen’s conception of the echo chamber, although independent from a particular notion of ignorance, involves an underlying notion of structural ignorance. By understanding ignorance to mean a socially supported epistemic behaviour centred on vicious counterevidence insensitivity, we can see that this notion of ignorance is central to Nguyen’s notion of echo chamber.

Second, I wanted to agree with Nguyen that echo chambers as an epistemological phenomenon do not need to be cashed out in political terms, particularly in terms of testimonial injustice. But I argued that a more politically charged account of echo chambers is available and would serve us well in our attempt to understand how these social epistemic structures are harmful beyond the harms they cause to their members’ bodies of knowledge. I showed that, by engaging with a high stakes case of an echo chamber, we can see how some ideas present in the debate concerning epistemic injustices are greatly informative to paint a worrisome picture of our epistemic lives.

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1. From reading Nguyen, one gets the sense that it is always bad and counter-rational to be in an echo chamber. However, one could argue that there can be good echo chambers, in the form, for example, of self-isolation from irrational or bigoted epistemic behaviour – or even value-neutral echo chambers, whatever form these might take. I don’t have the space here to try to adjudicate on the value of echo chambers. My point here is that, *if* we accept Nguyen’s notion of echo chambers, we *should* accept some conceptual consequences I draw. As it will be made clear later, if we accept echo chambers as social epistemic structures of discredit and exclusion, we must accept the underlying mechanisms that support such structures, even if, in the end, the echo chamber in question is one that has some positive practical, political or epistemic outcomes. I thank Jennifer Lackey and Sandy Goldberg for raising this problem for the account I develop here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Fricker 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mills 1997; 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an overview of some key conceptions of ignorance in the current literature, see El Kassar (2018; 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a longer taxonomy of the strands of social epistemologies of ignorance, see Tuana and Sullivan (2007). For a shorter taxonomy, see Alcoff (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Pohlhaus Jr. 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Pohlhaus Jr. (2012) for an extended discussion on how ignorance affects the way dominantly situated knowers fail to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See again Alcoff (2007) for a discussion on the contextual aspect of ignorance. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Supposing a minimal scenario where there are only two groups involved, those who accept climate change science and those who deny it. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nguyen’s paper main motivation is to draw a distinction between echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, where the later is characterised as ‘a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission’(2020, 143), where this exclusion is an accidental feature of the way we naturally form and engage with our informational networks (such as social networks). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For such an argument, see Marks et al (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. He does (e.g. 2020, 151). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Catala is concerned with a ‘simplified picture of the social ontology’. In that simplified picture, deliberations are also simplified as ‘for or against a certain practices’ (2015, 427). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/18/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-whatsapp-fake-news-campaign> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [Idem](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/18/brazil-jair-bolsonaro-whatsapp-fake-news-campaign) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There is a great number of legislative proposals being advanced in Brazil that aim to criminalize the teaching of ‘gender ideology’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)