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The Epistemic Injustice *of* Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract

This paper argues that the current discourse on epistemic injustice in social epistemology itself perpetuates epistemic injustice, namely hermeneutic injustice with regards to class and classism. The main reason is that debates on epistemic injustice have foremost focussed on issues related to gender, race, and disability while mostly ignoring class issues. I suggest that this is due to (largely unwarranted) fears about looming class reductionism. More importantly, this omission is not innocuous, but problematic insofar as it has an unlikely ally in neoliberal propaganda which features as one main goal stifling class consciousness. While this “allyship” is unwitting, this presents grounds for the discourse of epistemic injustice to consider re-centring class issues and classism.

Miranda Fricker’s work on *Epistemic Injustice* and the multitude of research projects it subsequently spawned have greatly improved our understanding of certain mechanisms of marginalization along epistemic axes. However, the discourse on epistemic injustice has had, since its inception, one central oversight: class and the many epistemic injustices associated with classism. There have been a few papers that do aim to bring the tradition of thought on class struggle into debate with epistemic injustice like Mills (2017), Celikates (2017) or Elling (2021). However, given the large umbrella of topics in social philosophy that epistemic injustice has been juxtaposed with, it remains *curious* that class and classism have been so neglected despite being traditionally one of the central concepts of debates on social injustice.

In this paper, I argue that the omission of class from debates on epistemic injustice is not only merely curious, but that it might constitute *itself an instance of epistemic injustice*. In particular, I aim to demonstrate the omission of class in the discourse on epistemic injustice is itself an instance of hermeneutical injustice, or that it serves to uphold existing structures of hermeneutic injustice. This kind of hermeneutic injustice is a specific kind of ideology that aims to stifle and suppress class consciousness. The current discourse on epistemic injustice is complicit in upholding obfuscation of the fundamental role of class for social (in)justice when they could to the opposite. While the conceptual toolbox of epistemic injustice and social epistemology more generally can be applied to class and classism, it is currently relatively rarely done, relative to how issues of gender and race tend to take centre-stage. Philosophers of epistemic injustice could be the kind of allies who contribute to class consciousness in *addition* to teasing out epistemic injustices associated with race, gender, or disability. The discourse on epistemic injustice is, in principle, equipped to deal with these issues. It would be misplaced to suppose that this omission has simply been due to the inability on the side of scholars of epistemic injustice since the debate boasts a number of the finest minds contemporary philosophy has to offer.

The first section works out the way in which epistemic injustice intersects with classism. On the one hand, classism is connected to testimonial injustice in the sense that socio-

economically subordinated people suffer from epistemic oppression in Kristie Dotson's sense. On the other hand, and more importantly, I suggest that there is a kind of hermeneutic injustice associated with classism. This hermeneutic injustice consists in neoliberal ideology which expresses itself in strategies to undermine class consciousness by reframing systemic issues of economic injustice and wealth distribution as results of 'personal or individual preferences'.

The second part demonstrates that the discourse on epistemic injustice, since its inception, has been neglecting class issues. I further suggest that this is caused by two factors: First, an unfortunate overshooting of wariness about class reductionism, and second, insights from standpoint theory suggest that—given that academic philosophy is still largely dominated by people with middle- and upper-class backgrounds—classism is an issue which is overlooked by proponents of epistemic injustice possibly due to their own social standpoint. This results in an instance of *active ignorance* (Alcoff 2007, Dotson 2011, Tuana 2004, El Kassar 2018) about classism permeating the discourse on epistemic injustice. The third part argues that the discourse on epistemic injustice shares the proliferation of active ignorance about classism with neoliberal propaganda—the main difference being that philosophers of epistemic injustice do so *unwittingly* (rather than wilfully). The last part consists in a plea to actively *remember* class issues in debates on epistemic injustice.

Before beginning, a few remarks are in order. In talking about the *discourse* on epistemic injustice, I aim to refer not only strictly to Fricker's work and the work of her followers, but also to the wider net of work on issues at the intersection of epistemology and social justice, e.g. issues of ignorance and epistemic oppression. Also, it will be important to stress again that by offering this diagnosis, I do not intend to fault or judge philosophers of epistemic injustice. While neoliberal pundits and ideologues usually pursue pernicious political goals, I do not think that the omission of class and class issues in the discourse on epistemic injustice is intentional or wilfully malevolent on their part.

Moreover, some may claim that class is not excluded, but simply 'implied' in some way. And it is certainly true that class is not *entirely* absent in the discourse. But such a rebuttal seems misplaced. Even if class issues are not *entirely* absent from the discourse they have quite literally been marginalized, i.e. confined to the margins in favour of centring race and gender. Providing one or a few counterexamples is not sufficient to address this problem.¹

Some may also object that a focus on class will turn back time, as it were, back to the Marxist roots of the topics at hand. As Fricker herself stated, she rejects a "monolithic social ontology of class" (Fricker 2017, 56) in favour of an intersectional approach. Re-focussing on class, however, does not "obscure" intersectional issues, but is rather a necessary condition to begin to lift the veil of ideology which fuels fundamental forms of oppression.

¹ A second point is that such an appeal to class being implied is analogous to how some reactionaries reject certain linguistic innovations, for example, giving up the generic masculine noun flexion in German. Being tacitly considered "implied", means not being present and visible at all in a similar manner in which women and other marginalized groups are often kept invisible.

Instead of assigning blame, the argument I develop here is merely meant to be stringent in applying standpoint epistemology in a manner that does not forget class.

Lastly, it is difficult, as philosophers are generally aware, to demonstrate that something does *not* exist or that they do *not* know about something. However, those familiar with the literature on epistemic injustice and related issues will become aware, in reviewing that literature, that class issues often do not take a prominent role. Especially since scholars on epistemic injustice are particularly cognizant of many modes of oppression and are careful to account for that in their work, it might be difficult for many to accept that there has been the collective omission of class that I point out here. But thinkers of epistemic injustice are acutely aware of this in other contexts:

What we attend to and what we ignore are often complexly interwoven with values and politics. [...] [I]f you discover new knowledge about something others do not take seriously, do not expect your knowledge projects to have much effect. The veil of ignorance is not so easily lifted (Tuana 2004, 219).

Convincing people that they are missing something integral when, in fact, they cannot detect such deficiencies is no easy task (Dotson 2014, 128).

If such scholars are aware of the nature of epistemic blind spots in comparable contexts, it should behave us to apply the same care to the discourse on epistemic injustice. The argument in this paper is simply meant as an *invitation* to apply the attitude expressed in these quotes to the discourse of epistemic injustice itself and to re-position class from the margins in the discourse on epistemic justice right into the centre with categories like race and class.

1. The Class Problem: Omission, Ignorance, and Hermeneutic Injustice

This section starts out by first arguing that the discourse on epistemic injustice tends to focus on race and gender as categories of (epistemic) oppression rather than class. I offer three possible reasons as to why this is the case. Secondly, this section argues that this omission constitutes a case of epistemic injustice in the tradition of Tuana and others. Discussions of class are often absent in analytic social philosophy, or they rarely take centre-stage while race, gender or disability currently tend to be prioritized over class. This seems particularly true in the relatively recent field of epistemic injustice. In the original *Epistemic Injustice*, Fricker makes only cursory, not systematic remarks, on class and classism (Fricker 2007, 15ff., 32, 171). In a later paper, Fricker aims to justify omitting certain traditions from reflections on epistemic injustice, particularly Foucault and Marx, which also includes a focus shift away from class:

Against this backdrop, what I hoped for from the concept of epistemic injustice and its cognates was to mark out a delimited space in which to observe some key intersections of knowledge and power at one remove from the long shadows of both Marx and Foucault, by forging an on- the- ground tool of critical understanding that was called for in everyday lived experiences of injustice [...]. As regards Marxism, for my purposes the

monolithic social ontology of class—or its gender or race counterparts—remained at that time riskily insensitive to other dimensions of difference, even if it was recognised to be an abstraction rather than an empirical generalisation (Fricker 2017, 56).

And although feminist standpoint theory at the time remained too beholden to the sweeping abstractions of Marxism to be viable, it contained a lasting methodological insight that was usefully sloganised by Sandra Harding (1991): ‘start thought from marginalized lives’. Start with the experience of powerlessness and show that it raises philosophical questions (Fricker 2017, 56).

It is certainly not only Fricker who marginalizes reflections on Marx and Marxism. Certain key publications (monographs, edited volumes, survey articles) on issues regarding epistemic injustice and wilful ignorance tend to marginalize class issues as well.² In all fairness, Fricker (2018) has recently welcomed, so to speak, Honneth’s (1996) recognition theory, which is rooted in Marxist and Critical Theory, as an ally to the concept of epistemic injustice. Yet even then, Fricker has not afforded class and classism a more privileged position in the debate.

This omission of Marxist thought is, at the very least, curious. It is curious in the sense that the Marxist tradition of ideology critique seems to be incredibly congenial to the debate on epistemic injustice, yet is rarely focussed on. To mention two examples that do mention it, Charles Mills suggests the concept of ideology ought to be brought “back to the centre of our theoretical attention” to understand the connection between social injustice and epistemic injustice (Mills 2017, 110). But even Mills mainly focuses on racism as an ideology and disavows a focus on class as one of Marxism’s “many weaknesses” (ibid). One example fully dedicated to teasing out Marxist ideas in relation to epistemic injustice is Elling (2021, 6) who argues that the concept of ideology ought to supplement the concept of epistemic injustice, or rather, that the concept of ideology “goes deeper”, as it were, in certain respects.

While I do share large parts of Mills’ and Elling’s thoughtful assessments, I shall argue that there is substance for more controversy here than their different irenic proposals. The omission of class from debates on epistemic injustice is not only, as mentioned, *curious*, but that it is an instance of epistemic ignorance.

To start off: What could be the reason for the omission of class from debates on epistemic injustice? While it might be impossible to give a definite answer, I am suggesting what I take to be two possible reasons: a rejection of class reductionism and a lesson from standpoint theory. The following suggestions are both tentative in that they are not meant to single out particular scholars of epistemic injustice or feminist philosophy more generally. The omission of class in different discourses on social and political justice is not due to single

² For example Kidd (2017), Medina (2013), McKinnon (2016), Sherman and Goguen (2019), Giladi and McMillan (2018).

well-meaning or malignant individuals. It is rather supra-personal phenomenon in the same sense that ideologies can be thought to be supra-personal.

Firstly, it is important to note that epistemic injustice is steadfastly rooted in the tradition of feminist philosophy. While I cannot give a detailed account of the history of feminist philosophy here, it is relatively safe to say that during the second half of the 20th century it was more heavily involved with Marxism than large strands of it are today. One central development in the history of feminist philosophy was its decade long separation from the Marxist tradition. Although there certainly still are self-identified Marxist or materialist feminists, the spectrum of feminist philosophy has by now been more stratified. One of the key motivations of abandoning the Marxist tradition was the accusation of class reductionism, i.e. the accusation that Marxist theory with its focus on class-struggle is too coarse-grained to adequately account for issues of justice by being dismissive of gender and race aspects. As Mills (2017, 101) bemoans, “Marxism’s concept of oppression is centred one-dimensionally on class”. Whether or not this accusation is warranted, the divorce from Marxist theory has certainly been very thorough. It might just be the case that the fact that class issues are marginalized in the discourse on epistemic injustice is simply a by-product of this emancipation from Marxist thought.

A second reason for the omission of class issues can be found by applying certain insights from standpoint theory. Fricker herself acknowledges early in her *Epistemic Justice* a commitment to standpoint theory, already cited above (Fricker 2017 56). Currently, standpoint epistemology is defined by two theses: the situated knowledge thesis and the epistemic privilege thesis (Rolin 2006). For our purposes the latter is relevant. According to the epistemic privilege thesis unprivileged social positions are likely to generate perspectives are “less partial and distorted” than perspectives generated by other social position (Rolin 2006, 125). More broadly speaking, standpoint theory suggests that “unequal power relations might structure inquiry or influence the production of knowledge” (Toole 2020, 1) (cf. also Ashton and McKenna 2020, 30). Or as Alcoff (2007, 44) puts it, “members of oppressed groups have fewer reasons to fool themselves about this being the best of all possible worlds [...]”. Expressed through the lens of class: the working class has a less distorted view onto socio-economic injustices whereas the middle and upper class have a personal stake in not knowing or caring about certain parts of social reality.

How could standpoint theory give us a clue as to why the discourse on epistemic injustice has, so far, been largely devoid of class issues? To see this, it is first important to note that academic philosophy, as a whole, has a class problem in the sense that individuals from the middle and upper-middle-class tend to be overrepresented, especially in very desirable tenured positions (Towers 2019). Stochastically speaking, there will be a large quantity of scholars on epistemic injustice (if this sub-group is at least *somewhat* representative of the group of academic philosophers as a whole) who themselves might be marginalized in virtue of gender, race, or disability, but not class.

And if even moderate forms of standpoint theory are correct, this membership to the middle-to-upper-class will play a part in pre-determining whether one is “blind” to the role

of classism and class in the same manner that, say, white people have to luxury of not having to think about race or racism very much. Furthermore, since epistemic injustice is part of feminist philosophy, the majority of actors in the discourse on epistemic injustice will be—stochastically speaking again—women because feminist philosophy is, obviously, dominated by women.

If it is true that the debate on feminist implications of epistemology in particular features a disproportionate amount of middle-to-upper class women, it is likely that their epistemic interest centers on gender insofar as they themselves experience oppression in virtue of being women, but is less likely to include discrimination based on class membership. If we are to take standpoint epistemology seriously, then we have to be open to the possibility that the discourse on epistemic injustice as rooted in feminist philosophy is (not exclusively, but disproportionately) shaped by the views and standpoints of middle to upper-class women. Having argued that a rejection of class reductionism and, stochastically speaking, the class identity of academic philosophers are perhaps reasons for the omission of class from large swathes of the debate on epistemic injustice, I am now going to suggest that we can apply some insights from the recent debate on *ignorance* to this phenomenon. In close relation to the idea of epistemic injustice, the last few decades have seen a rise of an epistemology of ignorance (cf. Smithson 2015, 385ff. for an overview). Ignorance in that tradition denotes more than simple cognitive oversight. In an article on female anatomy, Tuana (2004) focuses on “... practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, our *lack* of knowledge about a phenomena [sic] or, in some cases, an account of the practices that resulted in a group *unlearning* what was once a realm of knowledge (195).

She furthermore notes that ignorance in this sense is “an active production”, it is “frequently constructed and actively preserved” (195). This active character is related to the point that practices of ignorance make us *lose* knowledge because it is seen no longer as “valuable, important, or functional” (196). This conception of ignorance can be usefully expanded upon with Medina’s notion of meta-blindness. According to Medina, those who are epistemically privileged tend not to run:

[I]nto cultural limitations that render their experiences, problems, and even their lives unintelligible, as a result of not ever feeling severely constrained as speakers and subjects of knowledge, privileged subjects tend to be particularly reluctant to acknowledge the limitations of the horizon of understanding that they inhabit; that is, they tend to be *blind to their own blindness* [...] (Medina 2013, 75).

One prime case of meta-blindness is what has been called “white privilege”. In many Western countries, white people are privileged in a way that allows them to not think about their whiteness, or race more generally, because they are not disadvantaged or somehow constrained in terms of their race. The kind of active ignorance described by others neatly

lines up with Medina's meta-blindness: it 'pays' to remain blind about one's own blindness or ignorant about one's own ignorance.³

The relative silence on class issues in the discourse on epistemic injustice can be qualified as an instance of such ignorance. In the discourse on epistemic injustice, it is not the case that we simply do not know *yet*, as it were about the epistemic injustice associated with class and classism. It rather seems to be the case that we might be in the process of *losing* certain insights about classism that may have been present, i.e. specifically those insights about class that some feminist scholars absconded in the second half of the 20th century. As Tuana herself stated, "ignorance production emerge[s] from values and prior assumptions concerning proper ends" (Tuana 2004, 220). Given Tuana's conception of *active* ignorance, we ought to be wary to claim that the omission of class from the discourse on epistemic injustice were simply an innocuous oversight or an entirely blameless process. While no particular scholar can be blamed for not sufficiently including class issues in this discourse (just like Tuana did not blame any particular gynecologist for ignorance on female anatomy), the oversight of class still supervenes on the collective epistemic structure, i.e. the discourse, itself. The exclusion of class as a production of ignorance on class issues in the context of epistemic justice might not be a *deliberate* action, but it is still a *doing* by the epistemic peers in this discourse.

Furthermore, and this is the central point, this ignorance (in the terminological sense) presents us with a form of epistemic injustice. Recall that someone experiencing hermeneutic injustice is epistemically disadvantaged insofar as they do not have the conceptual resources to make full sense of their own social position. The omission of class *as* constituting active ignorance in the discourse on epistemic injustice *contributes* to the inability of oppressed classes to sufficiently make sense of their social position as determined by their class membership. While he focusses on the concept of ideology, Elling (2021, 5) correctly stresses that hermeneutic injustice also includes the inability "to even experience something *as* an injustice" (following Celikates 2017, 58). The discourse on epistemic justice could be a means to shine a light on epistemic injustice connected to classism, i.e. could help make us be *better* at experiencing class-based epistemic injustice, but the omission of class issues serves to further obscure and thus exacerbate epistemic oppression of the lower classes.

Taking stock of what has been stated in this section one can say that in practicing active ignorance about class and classism, the discourse on epistemic justice itself is structurally fraught with epistemic injustice. More specifically, the omission of class issues from the discourse on epistemic injustice constitutes a form of hermeneutic injustice. Now a defender of the (current state of) the work on epistemic injustice might simply insist that the omission of class is blameless and that that gender, race or disability have justifiably superseded class as key analytical categories, simply a result of the critique of class reductionism. In the next

³ As Elling reminds us, "the privileged do not *know* that there is a side to social reality that they do not know about. And this ignorance about their ignorance precludes them from developing the sensitivity required for hermeneutical justice" (Elling 2021, 3).

section however, I detail why those interested in (epistemic) justice ought to care about the omission of class.

2. Unwitting Complicity: The Curse of Neoliberal Propaganda

Given that the discourse on epistemic injustice neglects class issues, some may say: “so what? We’re all intersectional now.” There be good reason, some may hold that ‘we’ have evolved beyond a focus on class issues, as it were. There is, however, good reason to be cautious of the exclusion of class issues and classism from debates in normative social epistemology. Against such a reaction, this section argues that the omission of class is shared by neoliberal propaganda, thereby uncovering that in confining class to the margins, the discourse on epistemic injustice unwittingly makes an unwanted and unwelcome ally in neoliberalism.

To this end, this section first construes the relation between classism and testimonial and hermeneutical injustice respectively before giving a brief overview of some epistemological aspects of neoliberalism relevant to the current context. I shall aim to demonstrate that one of the main goals of neoliberal propaganda is to prevent and stifle class consciousness by diverting attention away from class and denying the crucial role class plays in virtual all aspects of social life. In this manner, neoliberal propaganda actively creates and enforces hermeneutical injustice as it pertains to class. The main point, however, then is that neoliberal propaganda thereby *shares* this aspect with the discourse on epistemic injustice: both engender hermeneutic injustice with regards to social class—the main difference being that neoliberal ideology does this *purposefully* while the discourse on epistemic injustice most likely does it *unwittingly*. This unwitting complicity ought to present strong reason to re-orient the discourse on epistemic injustice onto class, lest we play into the hands of neoliberal ideology.

Classism, i.e. discrimination based on class, is connected to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. On the one hand, it should be fairly straightforward that classism is closely connected to testimonial injustice. This can become clearer by considering what Dotson calls epistemic oppression, i.e. a kind of exclusion that “hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production” (Dotson 2014, 115). In virtue of socio-economic status alone, the working class generally are still disproportionately excluded from academic and scientific discourse in a way that excludes them from certain epistemic practices. This amounts to a specific kind of testimonial injustice: While representatives from lower classes are not only often afforded a credibility deficit in, say, courts (cf. Behuniak 2003), epistemic oppression begets fact that the testimony of lower classes by far and large as a means of knowledge production cannot adequately contribute to academic research. It is simply not heard because it is not given a chance to be heard.

However, the way classism connects to hermeneutical injustice is more pertinent to the current context. Hermeneutical injustice concerns those forms of injustices through which a person is disadvantaged in “making sense of their own social experience” (Fricker 2007, 146), it is “having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective

understanding” (Fricker 2007, 154). In order to apply this idea to class, it is first important to note that hermeneutical injustice and the Marxist concept of ideology aim to describe very similar phenomena: distortions of our understanding of the mechanisms of injustice, inequality, and oppression.

One of the most prevalent, most powerful, and most pernicious ideologies is ideology that upholds classism and socio-economic injustice. It has been one of the most potent intellectual strategies of neo-liberalist institutions and ideologues to obfuscate the role and reality of class and classism in an effort to thwart and dismantle burgeoning class consciousness. It is difficult to pin down what neoliberalism really is. The term “neoliberalism” has perhaps become a pejorative chiffrè for social injustice more than any other term. In this sense, it might seem warranted to decry the fact that neoliberalism can seem like a “conceptual Swiss Army knife which can unpick and cut through almost any argument concerning the modern world” (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, xiii). However, it is not too difficult to focus on some substantial semantic facets of the term.

I shall follow Pierre Bourdieu in using “neoliberalism” to denote the “transformative and [...] *destructive* action of all of the political measures [...] that aim to *call into question any and all collective structures* that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market.” (Bourdieu 1998). Accordingly, I use “neoliberalism” as a catch-all term to denote the individual or systemic advocacy for deregulation, privatization, ‘free’ markets, and solidification of the (late-stage) capitalist mode of production. It is difficult to overstate the effects that neoliberal politics have had in Western countries at least since the second half of the 20th century.

However, more than a top-down political movement, neoliberalism represents a means of social power and control. More specifically, the purpose of neoliberal propaganda is to disseminate and propagate neoliberal ideology. Following Jason Stanley, propaganda is “*manipulation of the rational will to close off debate*” in order to move certain groups towards immediate action (Stanley 2015, 48). Rather than presenting as one unified ‘theory’, neoliberal propaganda is constituted by an umbrella of neo-liberal misinformation and misdirection that causes, motivates, and fuels our collective ignoring of class and classism in debates on social injustice. In this sense, the action that neoliberal propaganda demands is, somewhat ironically, a kind of *inaction*: neoliberal propaganda is directed at appeasing swathes of a population through convincing them that the power structures they live in are unproblematic. It is to keep citizens from developing “fomenting dissent” (Stanley 2015, 50).

The three most important of these strategies to incite this *inaction* might be the ideology of individualism (Honneth 2004), the ideology of reconceiving justice as mere “equal opportunity” in tandem with “rags to riches” narratives and “bootstrapping” oneself out of poverty,⁴ and the ideology of “individual freedom”, most notably championed by ideologues like Ayn Rand. These three forms of ideology often overlap in practice, reinforcing one another. For example, the ideology of individualism is strongly connected to the idea of

⁴ This is an idea sometimes thought to have come into the mainstream through the rags-to-riches motives in the novels of Horatio Alger.

personal freedom which in turn often supports bootstrapping narratives. In any case, they all serve to obfuscate the social function of class, prevent burgeoning class consciousness, or even to deny the existence of social classes at all.

It is important to note that neoliberal propaganda, rather than the kind of agitation political grassroots movements engage in, is well-funded by powerful institutions. While most industrialized countries have neoliberal (or “free market”) think tanks on a national level, I shall focus on the largest ones from the Anglophone world: *Heritage Foundation*, the *Cato Institute*, the *Mises Institute*, the *Foundation for Economic Education*, and *PragerU*.⁵

Neoliberal think-tanks certainly do not openly state that it is their purpose to stifle class consciousness. Their strategy is more complex: Firstly, neoliberal think tanks may sometimes state that class is not important when it comes to questions of justice. Some might even deny that something like different social classes truly *exist* such that there is no class struggle to be had. While it is usually mentioned in debates on social ontology, the most famous expression of this idea comes perhaps from Margaret Thatcher, herself an icon of neoliberalism: “There is no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first” (Thatcher 1987).

While Thatcher here appeals to self-reliance of the individual rather than hoping for support from wider society, the kind of ontological individualism motivating this appeal can also be operative in denying the existence or relevance of social classes which constitute a large part of social reality.

Secondly, neoliberal propaganda has been rather successful in engineering certain normative concepts that would have implied a reference to the concept of class. The most salient example is the re-engineering of the concept of JUSTICE. While it is certainly a perennial debate what justice truly is, neoliberal think-tanks have been rather successful in establishing and consolidation a notion of justice that differentiates between justice as the equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome. Compared to, say, a framework of retributive justice, this re-defining of justice is purposefully myopic as it claims to redistribute opportunities as goods, but not wealth and power which largely determine one’s opportunities in life in the first place. This is often accompanied by neoliberal ideologues habitually decrying attempts at redistributing wealth at all. As a paradigmatic example, the *Cato Institute* suggests that a progressive income tax would, as it were, benefit the “envious and greedy”.⁶

The third and arguably most effective strategy is to simply *omit* any substantial mentioning of class. By far and large, neoliberal think-tanks operate within the ideological confines of neoclassical economy, touting it as being without alternative.⁷ It is futile to attempt to

⁵ Chafuen (2018).

⁶ Badow (2014).

⁷ There might certainly be some influence of Keynesianism here and there, but most think-tanks usually replicate the orthodoxy of neoclassical economy that is also present at (Wester) economics departments.

compile a list of instances in which neoliberal think tanks do *not* mention class. Since one of the goals of neoliberal propaganda is *inaction* related to class justice, not mentioning class at all is probably one of the most effective propagandistic tools. But one paradigmatic example is the *Koch Industry* think tank which lists its efforts pertaining to economic justice as:

- In Wichita and Kansas City, the Create Campaign provides business development support for minority founders and urban entrepreneurs.
- Dfree advocates for financial empowerment in the Black community through a partnership with Dr. DeForest "Buster" Soaries, a noted civil rights leader.
- SCLC/W.O.M.E.N., INC. is dedicated to addressing issues of social action, community and economic development in Atlanta by donating to various events and luncheons.⁸

Note the common buzzwords—"minority", "urban", "empowerment"—which do refer to race, yet no mention of class that could lead one to believe that inequality is not only a matter of race, but also of social class. In a similar vein, the vast majority of the thousands of articles produced by the *Cato Institute* focus on criminal justice (and its relation to race), rather than economic justice.⁹ Only a grand total of 16 articles even mention "economic justice" as a topic at all.¹⁰ And if class is mentioned at all, then usually in reference to an elusive "middle class"¹¹ or in reference to the "working class Americans [benefitting from] trade liberalization just as wealthier ones do",¹² thereby reinforcing liberalization of trade as another neoliberal trope.

What does neoliberal propaganda then have to do with hermeneutical injustice? Neoliberal propaganda, especially its treatment of the concept of class, serves to stifle class consciousness by downplaying or ignoring the role that class plays for economic justice and the world as a whole. Neoliberal propaganda thus prevents those affected by it to "make sense of their own social experience" (Fricker 2007, 146) and causes "significant area[s] of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding" (Fricker 2007, 154). In other words, neoliberal ideology solidifies a state of unawareness in both members of the ruling class and the working class as to how socio-economic stratification comes about and is maintained in future generations.

The vast majority of people are being systematically misled by neoliberal propaganda about their standing in the social world. Some scholars (Elling 2021, Mills 2017, Hähnel 2021) have rightly pointed out that this is akin to the Marxist notion of ideology. In particular, even if the concept of ideology covers more ground, ideologies like these present a case of hermeneutic injustice. Thwarting class consciousness, or even denying that (industrialized) societies are partially organized in terms of classes prevents those oppressed by the class

⁸ <https://www.kochind.com/breaking-barriers/social-justice>.

⁹ <https://www.cato.org/search?query=justice>.

¹⁰ <https://www.cato.org/search?query=%22economic+justice%22>.

¹¹ E.g. <https://www.cato.org/blog/middle-class-taxes-political-rhetoric-vs-economic-reality>.

¹² <https://www.cato.org/commentary/are-trade-wars-really-class-wars>.

system, mainly the working class, to fully understand their social position in the class spectrum. Neo-liberal ideology insinuating bootstrapping narratives implicitly and explicitly panders the view that one's social position is a result of one's own (in)activity, and not at least partially determined by the class one was born into. Neoliberal ideology, similar to, say, racist ideologies, thus presents broad, ongoing hermeneutic injustice.

What does this have to do now with the preceding critique of the current discourse on epistemic injustice? I have pointed towards neoliberal ideology in order to point out that the discourse on epistemic injustice unwittingly threatens to reinforce the same agenda that neoliberal ideology wilfully tries to disseminate. If this is correct, there is a certain irony: the discourse on epistemic injustice is dedicated to uncovering certain injustices while the seemingly structural exclusion of class from this debate is congenial to the pernicious aims of neoliberal ideology, i.e. stifling the development of class consciousness. To stress again, it is highly unlikely that scholars of epistemic injustice are deliberately ignoring class and classism in an effort to support neoliberal agendas. But nevertheless, in continuing to side-line issues of class and classism, the discourse on epistemic injustice is unwittingly complicit in upholding this specific brand of hermeneutic injustice. In consciously or unconsciously avoiding classism as a subject, the collective discourse on epistemic injustice makes itself complicit in upholding a neo-liberal ideology of power which thrives on suppressing class-consciousness.

3. Remembering Class: Against Epistemic Resilience

One of the great anxieties of 20th and 21st social philosophy has been centred on the idea of class reductionism. That is, the idea that some traditions of thought, particularly Marxism, claim that virtually all social struggles and questions of social justice can be construed in terms of class, functionally skipping over categories like race or gender which results, the critics pose, in an oversimplified picture of the social world. Whether or not these charges hold water, the argument I have presented here does not suggest that epistemic injustice itself ought to make *everything* about class. I have merely aimed to point out that class—despite its vital importance to virtually any social question—has been unjustly overlooked in debates on epistemic injustice. I have furthermore suggested that this oversight—willingly or unwillingly—perpetuates a form of hermeneutical injustice that has been most decisively shaped by neo-liberal propaganda at least since the second half of the 20th century. This hermeneutical injustice consists in the systematically obscuring the incomparable role class plays in shaping the social world, preventing the subordinated classes in particular from forming something like class consciousness, i.e. their belonging to a social group that is subordinated among various social axes due to their socio-economic status.

This difficulty is confounded by the fact that epistemic systems unfortunately tend towards epistemic resilience. And the different intersecting discourses on epistemic injustice and normative social epistemology certainly constitute such an epistemic system. Epistemic resilience is the measure in which a system can absorb resistance or disturbance before enacting structural change (Dotson 2014, 121). Given the conditions of academic discourses in general as determined by middle to upper-class individuals and given the plausibility of

standpoint theory argued above, it can be reasonably assumed that the discourse on epistemic injustice is resilient with respect to the omission of class. Luckily, Dotson too proposes a way to overcome epistemic resilience, albeit in a different context. Drawing again on her work, we can conceptualize what a necessary change for the better in this context would look like. Dotson (2018) transfers certain insights from organizational psychology about how organizations can effect change onto philosophical topics. To this end, she cites the idea of a three-tiered change system:

First-order change is the “tacit reinforcement of present understandings” (Dotson 2018, 118).

Second-order change is the “conscious modification of present schemata in a particular condition” (Dotson 2018, 118).

Third-order change “involves developing the capacity to recognize and alter elements” that “preserve organizational schemata” (Dotson 2014, 119).

We can, in turn, transfer Dotson’s argument onto the discourse on epistemic injustice itself. I have previously rejected simply choosing to include class in the discourse by adding this or that example of classism to the umbrella of analyses on epistemic injustice. That would merely constitute a second-order change. It is rather the third-order change that would be necessary for the discourse on epistemic injustice.

If this assessment is correct, what would be the proper way to proceed in debates on epistemic injustice? Such a third-order change, to invoke Charles Mills (1987), would present a basis for reconciling class and race in a manner that renders class still visible in analyses on epistemic injustice. In the same vein, it would be a good start to further nurture the discourse on epistemic aspects of class and classism in the ongoing dialogue between analytic social philosophy and the tradition of critical theory. For example, one could explore the ways in which class determines testimonial injustice insofar as poor people are often less readily believed in court simply due to their socio-economic status as communicated through status markers, e.g. inappropriate clothing or ‘incorrectly’ groomed appearance. But simply adding class to the umbrella of epistemic injustice (perhaps by offering a series of such analyses) is not sufficient as it would leave untouched the epistemic harm caused by having de-centred class issues so far.

If the foregoing analysis of the omission of class has merit, it seems that the discourse on epistemic justice—just like other subsegments of scholarship on justice—has a class problem that remains unaddressed. While (tautologically) any kind of classism constitutes a wrong, it is particularly pernicious in the case of the discourse on epistemic injustice since people working on such issues, one could expect, would be especially conscious of different kinds of hermeneutic injustice, including the one outlined here. We certainly cannot and ought not hold individual actors responsible for how the university and the scholarship produced in it reproduces itself as being held in the hands of socio-economically privileged people. Yet, if we are serious about social and epistemic justice, then we ought to take the diagnosis of the

classism-lacuna in debates on epistemic injustice seriously. For it is not the case that analyses of class issues are by design wholly alien to epistemic injustice. It is rather the case that class and classism ought to be remembered not only as simply one possible form of oppression that in some way intersects with other forms of epistemic injustice. Rather, in going forward, class ought to be treated as an epistemic injustice *in its own right*.

Part of the implications of what I suggest here is that the Marxists roots of normative epistemology (in particular standpoint theory and epistemic injustice) are to be re-appropriated in order to break the congenialities with neo-liberalist ideology. Just like some philosophers of language state with Frege that whole statements (and the assertion of them) constitute the “downtown” of language, so too can a Marxist rereading of epistemic injustice reposition class as the “downtown” of oppression. Just like such a move does not make one subscribe to a “monolithic ontology” of language, re-centring class in the manner I allude to here does not force one to subscribe to a “monolithic ontology of social class”, as Fricker decries.

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