On Knowledge Democracy

"The concept of knowledge democracy acknowledges the importance of multiple knowledge systems, such as organic, spiritual and land-based systems; frameworks arising from social movements; and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded. It is about open access for the sharing of knowledge, making it a powerful tool for taking action in social movements to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world.

Higher Education institutions today exclude many of the diverse knowledge systems in the world, including those of indigenous people and excluded racial groups, and those excluded on the basis of gender, class, or sexuality." (Hall and Tandon, 2017)

Most of us will have studied a very small part of the extensive and diverse knowledge systems of the world, and we will reproduce this understanding of what counts as most valid, credible, robust, accurate, and useful within our thinking and acting, and this is held up by the dominant narratives in the public sphere. Knowledge Democracy speaks to this, and grapples with critical questions such as: Who owns knowledge? Whose voice is credible? Who gets to generate knowledge? What does knowledge consist of? What are the hierarchies of different knowledge types? This goes beyond commonly held ideas that the work of democratizing knowledge can be done (simply) by capacity building and providing open access to data.

Whilst the commonly accepted understanding of 'what knowledge is' is dominant, there is resistance across the UK. For example, community-based participatory research is about knowledge as an action strategy for change and about rendering visible excluded knowledges. There is energy in grassroots collectives, often people of colour and other marginalised groups, who are challenging the dominant narratives written about their lives, and the structures that continue to silence their voice, in artistic and relational ways.

PART ONE: PROBLEM CONCEPTION

Knowledge, and how it frames our interaction with the world

Our knowledge flows and is formed within a particular "regime of truth" that we are immersed in (our assumptions, what we take to be 'common sense') and it delimits the horizon of understanding of what's around us – the boundaries of what is possible, conceivable, acceptable and real. Knowledge affects how we interact with the world: it is situated in its context, and connected to power dynamics, discourse, and governance (Foucault,1991). This becomes problematic when we assume it is neutral, objective, and singularly true.

Technologies, policies, and techniques of governance are not formed in isolation, but are created within deeply entrenched power dynamics based on these common knowledges and assumptions about the *way things are.* Since accepted knowledge fits within accepted norms, certain issues and voices are silenced and marginalised whilst others accorded importance (Kamaldeep Bui, 2018). With every piece of new knowledge generated, language used, and technique deployed in line with these norms, the hierarchy of most important voices and issues is maintained.

"What we know" has real world consequences, and they mutually reinforce one another. This can be seen in the welfare system. Through strict eligibility criteria a portion of the population is afforded certain entitlements, such as housing (this criteria isn't static since it is adapted to fit policy, shortage of housing, etc.). If someone meets this shifting entitlement the person gains a variety of identifiers – e.g. "a benefit claimant" – but this term is not neutral. Benefit claimants today are closely associated with being work-shy, untrustworthy, and potentially criminal. This narrative of the 'undeserving poor' is historically contingent – we don't have to look too far back to see a more compassionate understanding of benefit claimants, and narratives of the working class as principled and hard-working. But today, policies, popular culture and architecture reflect and reproduce the current understanding. For example, increasingly punitive and inflexible measures at the Job Centre reflect an understanding of the poor as work-shy – with every missed appointment reinforcing this narrative, and long sanctions reflecting a method of discipline considered appropriate to the act. TV programmes such as 'Benefit Street' would not have been produced and watched if it did not feed into accepted understandings of what a claimant 'looks like.' Finally, new-builds around London would not think it necessary to design-in a 'poor door', or design-out access to a communal garden that their private-renting counterparts use if there wasn't an implicit understanding of those accessing affordable housing as different.

1. Epistemicide and the hegemony of western post-enlightenment science

What our knowledge *consists of* is socially and culturally specific. It is widely acknowledged that the type of knowledge that Western societies value as the most credible, useful, and ultimately truthful are rooted in a world-view that believes the world is completely measureable and knowable, given the right tools and information. It is a scientific paradigm that has deep historical roots in The Enlightenment period and the philosophers associated with it. The scientific pursuit of knowledge came to dominate within other spheres of society outside of science, too, and was imposed globally through colonial practices that asserted the superiority of this knowledge system and the knowers themselves (to the detriment of indigenous people and knowledge systems).

The hierarchy of knowledge that asserts the scientific method as the most accurate, robust, and reliable tool for understanding society is deeply embedded and pervasive. Qualitative research is often seen as supplementary to its quantitative counterpart, and testimony/story-telling is reduced to 'anecdotal' forms of evidencing the world. Quantitative and data-driven knowledge is the form of evidence most readily acknowledged in government and policy making spheres. Consequently, to participate in decision-making requires a knowledge generator with the required level and type of education that enables them to detach themselves from the object of study and to rationally measure the world. This creates an illusion of expertise which renders other groups invisible/ incapable of generating knowledge, and simultaneously denies those without these tools to be knowers.

The issue is not the existence of scientific knowledge and measurements but that this worldview has become hegemonic and does harm to other groups and knowledge systems: if a knowledge system does not operate in objectivity then it lies outside the realm of truth, and within the realm of subjectivity, belief, opinion and intuition.

Epistemicide is the failure to recognise, or the silencing, of other knowledge systems and the different ways in which other people run their lives and provide meaning to their existence. The lack of

acknowledgement of other knowledge systems continues to have far-reaching consequences worldwide. Hall and Tandon (2017) note how one can fly to any higher education institution in the world and feel "at home" in a politics lecture, where the European Canon of political philosophy will be taught as the foundations of understanding. It whitewashes the culturally specific knowledges that exist around it and have come before it. Epistemicide is a form of dispossession. Decolonization, then, is the project of re-centring the world away from Europe, and centring the voices of the marginalised in ways that subvert colonial norms of knowledge generation.

Systematic Silencing of anything/anyone outside the dominant frames of understanding

Without critical attention to *whose* knowledge, *how* that knowledge was gathered, and *how* transformative change is encouraged then we will simply reinforce the existing colonized relations of power (de Sousa Santos, 2007). That is to say, if knowledge democracy simply seeks to build the capacities of people to access and utilise scientific knowledge, rather than interrogate and expand the limits of what is considered acceptable knowledge in the first place, we will continue to silence other voices and other forms of knowledge.

There are three ways in which the hegemony of western scientific knowledge does injustice to marginalised groups:

i. Missing Voices

Through the inflexibility of the empirical method that deals in hard statistics, facts, objectivity and strives toward generalisation, people are often left out. For example, those not in contact with the system will not appear in the data sets used to generate understanding of an issue. Lankelly Chase has seen this in the Hard Edges report (2015) where the voices of asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, and traveller communities exist in a footnote, and will be missed by policymakers even though they are experiencing extreme disadvantage. Similarly, through the particular data-sets we drew on to form this statistical profile, we initially missed the demographic of women experiencing extreme disadvantage, or the specific ways in which identity manifests within severe disadvantage (such as sexual orientation and gender identity).

ii. Dismissed Voices

Within the dominant understanding of knowledge there is a line. On one side is 'objective knowledge' – that which is measurable and scientific and holds the monopoly on truth. On the other lies "the dark world of passions, intuitions, feelings, emotions, affections, beliefs, faiths, values, myths, and the world of the unsayable" (de Sousa Santos, 2007). This differentiation is detrimental to alternative bodies of knowledge since science can render these knowledge systems illusionary, dangerous, and stigmatized. Impoverishing these knowledge holders pushes them further into oblivion. They are dispossessed of their knowing, and the non-dominant groups becomes "ignorant, inferior, local, particular, backward, unproductive, or lazy" (de Sousa Santos, 2007). It results in research being conducted that *concerns* marginalised people, rather than accepting knowledge that flows *from* them. This thinking is termed "abyssal thinking" and it is to the detriment of everyone that we do not recognise a wider system of knowledge – whether indigenous, ecological, or embodied (often all).

For example, this 'knowledge line' can be seen in the UN Secretary General's assertion that

> 'Information and knowledge are central to democracy, they are the conditions for development…it is our responsibility to see that gift bestowed on all the world's people, so that all may live lives of knowledge and understanding' (Annan, 1997)

This statement fails to consider that "all the world's people" may have plenty of knowledge already, of a different sort, which has sustained them for tens of thousands of years.

iii. Distorted Voices

The pervasiveness of the Western, rational way of knowing has deeper exclusionary outcomes than a lack of descriptive representation. Muted Group Theory suggests that the dominant cultural group determines the communication system and structures of the whole society. Consequently, non-dominant groups are rendered 'inarticulate' and their voices are muted or distorted. They must conform to the accepted ways of speaking, knowing, interacting, and understanding the world in order to be heard, and have their experience legitimised. This is disempowering: the world does not accept their experience, and/or it is not presented in a vocabulary of their choosing.

Viewing knowledge through this lens invites us to critique *what* knowledge is being democratised, and makes it paramount to understand the subjectivity of experience, and evaluate knowledge from a variety of standpoints.

Deep Time

The Western knowledge system positions the human in relation to the rest of the world. Alongside the development of science was a concurrent belief in the progress of the human race. As well as feeling more advanced than indigenous peoples, the sense of themselves as able to harness and measure the natural world disconnected humanity from the environment. The concept of "Deep Time" seeks to redress this by situating humanity in its wider historical context:

> Humans are part of a very long, deep history that is not simply theirs; that history is vastly older than their very existence…the human race is very recent. Our history is therefore one of entanglement with multiple other species...the dualistic partitions of minds from bodies, meaning and matter, or nature from culture can no longer hold.

In essence, the world exists without us. It has and will continue to do so. Decolonised knowledge seeks to shift our thinking of humanity from the 'mastery of creation' to 'its finitude and possible extinction'. A wider perspective which can allow us to see ourselves in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe, nonhumans included.

Extended epistemology

Extended epistemology is a concept originated by John Heron and developed in collaboration with Peter Reason to call attention to and legitimate the many ways in which individuals come to know beyond the boundaries of abstracted, intellectual thought alone. Heron and Reason offer four interrelated ways in which people know:

- *Experiential:* knowing directly through experience

- *Presentational:* knowing through artful means
- *Propositional:* knowing conceptually
- *Practical:* knowing through skilful doing

In the knowledge system of the objective knower we have also lost the wider, more intuitive and tacit knowledges that exist, "We are fundamentally bodily beings whose rationality is but one aspect of our animality." This dependency on science and technology detaches us from our embodied knowledge.

Part 2: DEMOCRATIZATION: OBSERVATIONS ON WHERE AND HOW

Frameworks arising from marginalised groups and community organising

Our elitist stance of knowledge generation reduces the value and recognition of grounded and localised knowledge. If we widened our horizon of where knowledge is generated, and engendered trust in the flows of knowledge we can see the ways in which action is being undertaken in radically caring and relational ways.

The notion of *Potencias* has been used to describe the knowledge creating power of revolutionary movements of historically subjugated peoples, and can be seen at the heart of self-determining communities engaged in creating new social economies and other means of community development outside the dominant political structures of their locations and times.

Some of these collectives are loosely organised, socio-culturally specific, and deliver services to an immediate community within publically shared spaces through tapping into local resources. In these collectives the personal, political and civil action are blurred, and money is not directly central to sustaining themselves.

"Community centred knowledges" incorporate a holistic model of care and a relational approach to problem solving that is absent in the technocratic fixes of top-down policy making. They are often so small as to go unnoticed (not large enough to be registered on the charities commission, for example), and are rarely looked at in-depth or learned from, but their models can teach us a great deal.

Civil Engagement and Re-Imagining the University

The university is an institution whose knowledge and knowledge generation capacities are valorised. Academic work is tightly controlled by the systems in place around it – targets, time constraints, resource constraints, donor-driven research agendas - all impact on issues of control and framing in the research process, and what knowledge is desirable and obtainable.

It is necessary to question the way higher education institutions operate in order to redistribute the capacity to make inquiries and forays beyond our current knowledge horizons. More than typical university community engagement programmes, civil engagement should engender trust in the flows of knowledge both ways. Not seeing the university as imparting knowledge *to* the community, but a space where knowledge can be gained from the community itself – a classroom without walls, deinstitutionalising and decolonising the university and questioning its purpose – and shared back

with them for a shared purpose. This involves embracing localised and grounded knowledge, and embracing wider mediums of knowledge production.

Opening Access for the Sharing of Knowledge

"Open access" can mean a variety of things. It essentially deals with making data more accessible – whether that is removing pay walls, increasing access to datasets, or building capacity. The UK Government's interest in Open Access ends here, in removing pay walls so that access to research is not restricted to academics within institutions.

At its more critical, open access also deals with questions around inbuilt bias into datasets and algorithmic code, in which case increasing perspectives is a useful method of calling Big Data to account. This involves more proactive efforts at inclusion, whether building capacity, or teaching young people data analysis methodologies, or hosting hackathons in the community to gain wider perspectives.

Big data are most valuable when they move around, travel to new sites, and are interpreted in relation to different questions and problems. The concern is around the quality and credibility of the data themselves and the processes used to transform those data into knowledge. Most data collections and online repositories lack effective systems of review and quality control. Similarly, there is little scrutiny of the assumptions and bias built into data mining algorithms used for data retrieval and analysis, which serve only to reproduce norms and inequalities.

'Data literacy' is building capability through more data science skills-training programs. Schools and non-profit organizations (e.g. Girls who Code) have emerged to tackle the digital divide by providing coding programs and technical curricula. An increasing number of data journalists are using and writing about data. Open data and civic technology advocates have organized hackathons for civic hackers to use technical skills and foster new conversations on data for social good. This creates new opportunities to develop insights, knowledge and innovation that benefit everyone.

Artistic mediums

There is knowledge being generated at all times in forms and languages that aren't legitimised in the common understanding and there is a diverse range of activity across various platforms to generate new knowledge from excluded voices.

The goal is creative practices that ultimately make it impossible for official structures to ignore them and not recognise them, to pretend that they are not there; to pretend that they do not see them or to pretend that their voice doesn't count.

The benefit of more creative, artistic and often therapeutic methods are that they allow people to generate knowledge and communicate it in a medium that is best suited to them, and what we can learn from it. They are usually more engaging, that incorporate a wider definition of knowledge (e.g. embodied), and can gain richer insights into peoples' experiences.

Participatory Research Methods and Experts by Experience

Participatory research is not a singular methodological approach, but a broader objective of handing power from the researcher to research participants in the belief that they are the true experts. To

varying degrees according to the project, participants can define the research agenda, the process and actions, as well as being the primary analysts of the findings and proposing the solutions.

Participatory Research enables ordinary people to play an active and influential part in decisions which affect their lives. This means that people are not just listened to, but also heard; and that their voices shape outcomes. Because respect for local knowledge and experience is paramount, the result is interventions that reflect local realities, which often leads to longer lasting social change.

Furthermore, accepting that participants have the experience and knowledge to be the experts has the potential to shift the hierarchy of knowledge-power and have deeper impacts on the knowledge system more generally.

'On Knowledge Democracy'

Discussion paper by Alice Lemkes for Lankelly Chase

Autumn 2018