

# Collaboration or Exploitation?

## Identifying Epistemic Exploitation in Academia

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### Introduction

What is the role of scholars whose work has activist intentions? According to Michael Apple<sup>1</sup>, “critical educators must [...] act in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports,” thus giving their own “expertise to agendas surrounding movements.” He claims that some further conditions should be met in conjunction with this collaboration with social movements, such as “being a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities” and “mak[ing] use of our privilege to open the spaces at universities and elsewhere for those who are not there.”

This paper engages with the discussion by considering how sometimes what may seem like a fruitful collaborative project is in fact another case of exploitation of the oppressed and less privileged. I endorse the idea that researchers and educators should do their best to contribute to social and political movements. However, this is not always done in a genuine way. Here I shall specifically introduce and discuss two cases of collaboration that turn into exploitation, one between Global North and Global South researchers, and another among the Global South community itself. Both examples are drawn from projects related to anti-colonial, decolonial and post-colonial research.

### The role of diversity

I would like to make explicit that I firmly believe that collaboration is essential. I am in agreement with those who defend the idea that diversity of views is a sign of progress, objectivity and justice. However, a somewhat meritocratic sentiment

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1 Apple, Michael: Challenging the Epistemological Fog. The Roles of the Scholar/Activist in Education, in: *European Educational Research Journal* 15 (2016) 5, 512–513.

has surfaced within the philosophical community through Peter Singer's voice.<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase him: why should we work with researchers from underdeveloped countries if we already have better and more established ones in our own community? What this entails is the following narrative: there are no reasons to work with non-western, or non-white, or non-male dominated academic communities if white male dominated spaces are where the most recent and developed projects are located. An underlying assumption of this narrative is that of the inferiority of non-western research. This inferiority would be expressed, for instance, in terms of their lessened access to resources and a worse command of the standard scientific language, which in turn would result in worse scholarship.

This “inferiority of non-western research” claim is present when Singer argues that philosophers from the Global South are not even participating in the same discussion as he and his peers are. One could say that Singer is correct if we understand that “participating in the same discussions” means to partake in the most prestigious academic environments. This narrative can be defeated if, as Helen De Cruz suggests, we shift perspectives and realize that the problem is not on the side of the underrepresented philosophers. The onus is not on them to “catch-up” to the higher level where Singer is standing.<sup>3</sup> The notion of academic prestige must be questioned. In this context this means that the structural insularity of most anglophone western philosophy departments must be recognized and deconstructed.<sup>4</sup>

An integral part of these institutional structures is the academic publishing system. De Cruz shows us that “the way in which anglophone, western departments cite, invite and hire primarily from each other is not purely due to meritocratic reasons.” Inspired by Schliesser's statement that “professional philosophy is best compared to a credit economy with currency controls,”<sup>5</sup> she argues that this way of structuring our professional interactions and activities “further amplifies existing inequities,” since the ones that most benefit from the credit economy “already have so much structural advantage in terms of research funds and academic freedom.” She concludes with the claim that “more engagement with philosophers outside of

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2 See Gross, Daniel: Peter Singer Is Committed to Controversial Ideas, in: *The New Yorker* (25/4/2021) <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/peter-singer-is-committed-to-controversial-ideas> (27/4/2023).

3 De Cruz, Helen: Why We Ought to Collaborate with Philosophers across the Globe. A Reply to Peter Singer, in: *The Philosophers' Cocoon*, 2021, <https://philosopherscocoon.typepad.com/blog/2021/04/why-we-ought-to-collaborate-with-philosophers-across-the-globe-a-reply-to-peter-singer.html> (27/4/2023).

4 See Schwitzgebel, Eric et al.: The Insularity of Anglophone Philosophy. *Quantitative Analyses*, in: *Philosophical Papers* 47 (2018) 1, 21–48.

5 Schliesser, Eric: Major League Philosophers and an Adjunct, in: *Digressions&Impressions* 2015, <https://digressionsimpressions.typepad.com/digressionsimpressions/2015/10/when-major-league-philosophers-talk-to-the-rest-of-us.html> (27/4/2023).

the credit economy would diversify the field.” This diversification would improve our chances of building out a truly global philosophical community. For instance, having more genuine international collaboration could mean more discussions about philosophies of indigenous peoples or feminisms of the South in Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments, a movement that could benefit students from underrepresented groups in philosophy departments in the Global North.

The main concern I want to raise here is that even when people are actively looking to establish international collaboration, there are still significant and complex challenges. One such challenge is connected to the idea of a credit economy in academia but expanded to all social relations, where the currency is social credit (fame, prestige, recognition, admiration, gratitude). This notion of a social credit economy within academia is at play in the two cases I analyze here.

## Epistemic exploitation and epistemic appropriation

Two concepts from social epistemology are relevant to this discussion: epistemic exploitation and epistemic appropriation. In Berenstain’s words, “epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face.”<sup>6</sup> There is an intersectional understanding of oppression and privilege underlying her account: “Someone is a marginalized person within a context of epistemic exploitation if they experience the oppression about which the education is demanded and the person demanding it does not.”<sup>7</sup> The kind of epistemic exploitation I wish to highlight occurs when a researcher who is not a member of a given oppressed community decides to develop a collaborative project with them, but only or primarily does so for social credit benefiting their own career, without actually caring to generate research aiming to improve the community, be it directly by helping to change their social reality, or indirectly by lending their privileged position as a researcher to bring more attention to the problems within this community.

Here it is important to discuss the different meanings we may say that someone belongs to a community or group. There is a broader and a contextual sense of belonging. Think of possible cases of North American Black feminists exploiting the work of Latin American Black feminists.<sup>8</sup> In the broader sense, we may say that both belong to the same community of Black feminists. A contextual sense of belonging

6 Berenstain, Nora: Epistemic Exploitation, in: *Ergo* 3 (2016) 22, 569–590, 570.

7 Ibid.

8 See Perry, Keisha-Khan: The Groundings with My Sisters. Toward a Black Diasporic Feminist Agenda in the Americas, in: *The Scholar & Feminist Online* Rewriting Dispersal: African Gender Studies 7 (2009) 2, <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/the-groundings-with-my-sisters-toward-a-black-diasporic-feminist-agenda-in-the-americas/> (14/9/2023); Rodrigues, Cristiano et

shows us that there are critical boundaries within the broader communities. On this level, the Latin American and the North American Black feminists do not belong in the same group, so an inter-group exploitative relationship would be considered.

Cases of epistemic exploitation are even more dangerous when involving epistemic appropriation. According to Davis, epistemic appropriation is the sum of epistemic detachment, the phenomenon of dominant groups valuing and acquiring epistemic resources developed within the margins but proceeding to overtly detach them from their producers, and epistemic misdirection, which happens when these resources produced by marginalized knowers are “utilized in dominant discourses in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful.”<sup>9</sup> Focusing our attention on academic settings, we may consider how the intersectionality criterion mentioned above proves to be useful once again, as there is a dynamic of exploitation and appropriation between (a) people from social movements and marginalized groups and (b) people affiliated to universities (without allegiance to social movements or belonging to marginalized groups). In a general way, this dynamic can be described as (b) visiting (a) pretending to have benevolent intentions in establishing a relationship but are doing so to earn epistemic credibility and social credit for prestige among their peers and admiration among their subordinates.

This kind of dynamic can be subtly observed in various supposedly activist practices. A particular case is of what I call “ghost social project.” These projects overtly state their purposes as beneficial to the public, but covertly are centered in promoting their organizers’ image and influence through different mediatic tools. For instance, when scientists from the university visit traditional rural communities, such as the Brazilian *quilombos*, wanting to enlighten them on sustainable and agroecological practices, while completely ignoring and discrediting how the practices of such communities are already sustainable and have been so due to their generational knowledge which precludes any destructive relationship towards nature. It is interesting to note that these visits connected to supposedly social projects are always put on the spotlights of newspapers and social media as a way to maintain or acquire more social credit, but these activities seem to not lead to structural changes to the academic system.

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al.: Ativismo Feminista Negro no Brasil: do movimento de mulheres negras ao feminismo interseccional, in: Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política 2021, e238917.

9 Davis, Emmalon: On Epistemic Appropriation, in: Ethics 128 (2018) 4, 702–727, 705.

## Two cases of epistemically harmful collaboration

Let us now consider the two cases:

- (1) The inter-hemisphere case: A socially privileged Latin American researcher invited to present in Europe taking advantage of the ignorance of their hosts about the context of specific areas of Latin America that they propose to discuss to gain more social credit by talking about decolonization over a given indigenous community without properly addressing the issue.
- (2) The intra-hemisphere case: A socially privileged researcher in a Global South country that just started publishing and participating in decolonization debates about a given indigenous community in their country to take advantage of their amplified voice as a researcher only to gain social credit without genuinely caring or contributing to the debate and the community.

Both are seemingly following Apple's condition to "act in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports." Even so, there are epistemic harms present. This means that either Apple's condition is not enough to guarantee a non-exploitative collaboration relationship, or that the researchers from (1) and (2) are in fact distorting what "acting in concert" should mean, thus not following his condition. In case (2) the researcher is even aware of their privileged position, which Apple highlights as a useful tool for promoting social causes, but their use is only for self-benefit. What seems clear is that one can join collaborative efforts for their own sake and manipulate the situation in ways that greatly diminishes the chances of getting ousted or reprimanded, as they can make it seem like they are acting in concert with the causes and demands of the marginalized community in question.

How can we identify and avoid these situations? Case (1) and case (2) have slightly different symptoms and diagnosis; thus they require similar, but not the same response. The first case is more related to epistemic appropriation since the researcher is intentionally presenting a simplified and superficial understanding of the epistemic resources from the indigenous community without necessarily misdirecting it completely, as this could prompt a negative reaction from their European hosts. Here the epistemic exploitation is more subtle. The Latin American researcher does cite and appears to recognize some portion of the original producers of the knowledge. What may at first seem like genuine recognition and a proper use of sources to support their project, is in fact an instance of tokenization, in the sense that this portion of the original producers are unilaterally and superficially included in the work, and a lot of other relevant and important sources are arbitrarily left out of the discussion, otherwise the Latin American researcher would have a harder time claiming originality to their contribution. The second case involves epistemic exploitation more explicitly, as the researcher is in their own territory, thus being able to enjoy

the benefits from being in a dominant position, safeguarded by their peers from retaliation coming from the margins.

Addressing case (1) comes with various challenges, such as the problems of the reviewing and publishing system in academia mentioned above, where the prestige keeps out those without the right credentials, and the credit system makes it so that the ones with the right credentials have to continuously compete, so that even if they would like to engage in collaborative work with underrepresented communities, they are pressured into delaying or cancelling these plans as it would not help them accrue more credits. One suggestion would be to seek trustworthy consultants from within the contexts, which is not an easy task, and might generate a form of anxiety and distrust where there is never enough guarantee that the chosen people are not manipulating their images. Responding to case (2) is even more difficult to achieve as it requires a more radical change in the structure of research and higher education institutions, seriously facing up to forms of corruption that come from the credit economy model.

Should Global North researchers completely refrain from contributing to discussions on decolonization if they are not directly collaborating with Global South researchers? No. My point here is to make way for more research on socially relevant topics such as this one. But these research projects without direct collaboration should also be done with care and respect, and not primarily to gain social credit. If that is the case, then what does collaboration without exploitation look like? I believe that the work by Renck and colleagues, “Taking fishers’ knowledge and its implications to fisheries policy seriously,” is a good example.<sup>10</sup> A group of European researchers collaborated with Latin American researchers from the relevant regions in order to understand more about the fishing practices of marginalized communities living by the riverside. The study explicitly discusses the challenges and risks of such international and transdisciplinary projects and proposes policy changes based on the knowledge produced by the artisanal fisheries in order to improve their social and material reality. Instead of bringing the focus unto themselves as proponents of an innovative project, the work raises awareness for the struggles faced by the marginalized group. It avoids the problems identified in both (1), since there is genuine collaboration between Global North and Global South researchers, and (2), as there is genuine collaboration between researchers and oppressed communities. In other words, it does not involve epistemic exploitation of Global South researchers, nor does it engage in epistemic appropriation towards the fishing community.

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10 See Renck, Vitor et al.: Taking Fishers’ Knowledge and Its Implications to Fisheries Policy Seriously, in: *Ecology and Society* 28 (2023) 2, article 7.

## Cautionary tale

“Decolonization is a career move.” This assertion means that there are cases in which the choice to work on decolonial studies is primarily motivated by one’s self-promotion. It was recently posted online by postcolonial and queer studies researcher Sandeep Bakshi, and it carries one of the key messages that motivate this paper. Bakshi is making a general claim prompted by a specific instance of malpractice within the decolonial studies field: the sexual misconduct case of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, prestigious Portuguese sociologist, and left-wing activist, famous due to his works on decolonization. It illustrates well the complexity and systematicity<sup>11</sup> of the problem of epistemic exploitation and appropriation in collaborative projects: a prominent figure in the field of decolonization, who supposedly is an ally to the marginalized knowledge producers, is in fact are using them to acquire both academic and social credit.

The scenario is as follows. Three women who underwent Santos’ supervision at the Social Studies Centre in Coimbra, which was founded by him, accused Santos and other members of abuse of power and sexual harassment via an anonymized chapter published on a Routledge book about sexual misconduct in academia. Soon after publication, two main reactions occurred.<sup>12</sup> First, retaliation from Santos through interviews<sup>13</sup> and a letter called “Journal of a Defamation.”<sup>14</sup> Second, support for the victims through a manifest signed by Portuguese researchers.<sup>15</sup> The power imbalance in this case became even clearer due to the recent publicization of a previously private letter in solidarity of Boaventura de Sousa Santos signed by almost eighty “prominent personalities from several countries,” ranging from authors who are also facing sexual harassment accusations, such as John Comaroff<sup>16</sup>, to admired scholars, such as Lewis Gordon, Chantal Mouffe, and Etienne Balibar.

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- 11 See Mansfield, Beck et al.: It’s Time to Recognize How Men’s Careers Benefit from Sexually Harassing Women in Academia, in: *Human Geography* 12 (2019) 1, 82–87.
  - 12 Pritchard, Erin, et al.: *Sexual Misconduct in Academia. Informing an Ethics of Care in the University*, London 2023.
  - 13 See Cândia, Fernanda: Boaventura dá primeira entrevista sobre acusações: “Fui feminista toda a vida. Mas é preciso distinguir as lutas genuínas”, in: *Diário de Notícias*, (12/7/2023) <https://www.dn.pt/sociedade/boaventura-da-primeira-entrevista-sobre-acusacoes-fui-feminista-toda-a-vida-mas-e-preciso-distinguir-as-lutas-genuinas-16683463.html> (14/9/2023).
  - 14 See Santos, Boaventura: *The Journal of a Defamation*, in: *Other News – Voices against the Tide*, (18/4/2023) <https://www.other-news.info/the-journal-of-a-defamation/> (14/9/2023).
  - 15 “WE ALL KNOW” BUALA, (18/4/2023) <https://www.buala.org/en/mukanda/we-all-know> (13/9/2023).
  - 16 See Xiu, Meimei: Harvard Prof. John Comaroff Faces New Allegations of Misconduct in Amended Suit, in: *The Harvard Crimson* (29/6/2022) <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/6/29/comaroff-amended-complaint/> (14/9/2023).

Routledge unilaterally decided to “permanently withdraw” the chapter.<sup>17</sup> Before we move on to discuss how this case also involves epistemic exploitation and appropriation, first let me describe how it fulfils all the standard conditions of reactions to sexual misconduct accusations in academia:

- Unequal standing: a prominent figure in a trending field with a lot of political and epistemic power is accused of sexual harassment by former students and receives massive support from their powerful peers.
- Delayed justice: the accusation occurs years later because the victims feared even stronger victim blaming.
- Alternative means: the victims chose to avoid the legal and institutional means for the accusation since those are intentionally ineffective in such cases.
- Credibility deficit: the victims’ accusation is dismissed as personal revenge and ideological dispute, as well as other forms of undermining their credibility.
- Silencing: the chapter is deemed false and lacking in scientific rigor, withdrawn from publication.

One important consideration is that this example represents just the tip of the iceberg. As the manifest “WE ALL KNOW” vehemently puts it,

asymmetries in power lead female researchers, dependent on the institution’s validation for their financial and even migratory security, to silence their abuse to avoid problems or even retaliation. [...] To date, in the two days since the chapter was made public, there were dozens of public testimonies and as many complaints – all reporting a reality undeniably known and tolerated for decades.

One of the testimonies that surged after the publication of the chapter is especially relevant for our purposes, as it draws connections to how Boaventura practiced epistemic exploitation and appropriation. An Argentinian indigenous activist, Moira Millán, described in an interview how Boaventura de Sousa Santos attempted to sexually abuse her in 2010.<sup>18</sup> In an open letter addressing Santos, Millán highlighted how his work engages in epistemic exploitation and appropriation:

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17 See Morgan, John: Sexual Misconduct Book Chapter ‘Spiked’ after Professor Objects, in: Times Higher Education (THE) (12/9/2023) <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/sexual-misconduct-book-chapter-spiked-after-professor-objects> (13/9/2023).

18 See Kotowicz, Ana: Moira Millán, a indígena argentina que acusa Boaventura de tentativa de abuso: ‘Ele que me olhe na cara, nos olhos, e negue o que me fez’, in: Observador, (14/9/2023) <https://observador.pt/especiais/moira-millan-a-indigena-argentina-que-acusa-boaventura-de-tentativa-de-abuso-ele-que-me-olhe-na-cara-nos-olhos-e-negue-o-que-me-fez/> (14/9/2023).

You have been the beneficiary of large sums of money to investigate our struggles and the mechanisms of colonization and oppression that we still suffer. You are part of academic extractivism, (...) using us as guinea pigs for your research that grants you privileges and power. You are incapable of considering reciprocity with the peoples and activists, who are leading the fight against colonialism and oppression.<sup>19</sup>

Her speech must prompt us to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Santos' motivations to do sociological and philosophical research on the Global South. Nirwal Puwar has picked up on this issue of epistemic exploitation and appropriation and framed it as a center-staging process, through which figures such as Santos propose to bring knowledge from the South to the North, but "it is they who become the flag bearers of this enterprise" in place of the marginalized knowers who produced the now suddenly valuable resources.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper is a cautionary tale of how there can be hidden and overlooked challenges to genuine collaboration within research contexts. It is successful insofar as it contributes to a broader comprehension of the risks involved in inter-communal collaboration and provides some tools for both reflection and action to those who recognize the importance of seriously accounting for the multiple layers of injustice underlying the structures of academia. I believe that any solutions to cases like the ones presented above are not to be carelessly generalized. I am not very optimistic about the effectiveness and implementation of solutions to these issues in a universal way. The necessary changes at least begin to spread through local initiatives around the globe. The lesson to be learned is that we need collaboration and diversification, but this must be done to produce research that seriously and consistently cares for the issues addressed, and not to satisfy the urge for academic and social credit.

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19 Fúnez-Flores, Jairo: A thread on Indigenous Mapuche Activist Moira Millan's Open Letter to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in: Twitter, (11/6/2023) [https://twitter.com/Jairo\\_I\\_Funez/status/1667869718902972419](https://twitter.com/Jairo_I_Funez/status/1667869718902972419) (14/9/2023).

20 See Puwar, Nirmal: Puzzlement of a Déjà vu: Illuminaries of the Global South, in: *The Sociological Review* 68 (2020) 3, 540–556.

