Anti-Imperial Epistemic Justice: Notes on 'Post Development', Rights Politics and Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences

Sumi Madhok

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Sumi Madhok is Professor of Political Theory and Gender Studies and Head of the Department of Gender Studies at LSE. Quite unusually, she is a feminist political theorist with an ethnographic sensibility. Her work combines theoretical, conceptual and philosophical investigations with detailed ethnographies of the lived experiences, political subjectivation, and political struggles for rights and justice, specifically, in South Asia.

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University Kassel
Faculty of Social Sciences
Development and Postcolonial Studies
Nora-Platiel-Str. 1
34127 Kassel
Phone 0049-561-804-3023
ziai@uni-kassel.de

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Anti-Imperial Epistemic Justice:
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Sumi Madhok

Abstract

In this working paper, I introduce the framework of anti-imperial epistemic justice which I argue is a necessary framework for producing knowledge on rights politics in 'most of the world, and also for knowledge production on most of the world, more generally. The working paper highlights a few key intellectual resources for thinking about anti-imperial epistemic justice including critical interventions advanced by postdevelopment and pluriversal thinking.

Keywords: Pluriversal Thinking; Rights Politics and Anti-Imperial Epistemic Justice[1]

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[1] I am very grateful to Aram Ziai for his longstanding and careful engagement with my work and for inviting me to Kassel as a Mercator Fellow in November 2022 to work on anti-imperial epistemic justice and knowledge production in the social sciences. I benefit enormously from our many conversations, and especially on postdevelopment and pluriversal thinking. Some of the intial ideas on anti-imperial epistemic justice were also presented at the workshop organized by Bal Sokhi Bulley and Louiza Odysseos on 'After Rights? Politics, Ethics, Aesthetics'. My many thanks to Bal and Louiza for helping me think through the question of anti-imperial epistemic justice more clearly. Readers can find the published papers presented at the workshop in the Special Issue 'After Rights? Politics, Ethics, Aesthetics', The International Journal of Human Rights.

1 Introduction

What is anti-imperial epistemic justice[2]? Why does it matter to human rights and rights politics in most of the world? By "most of the world"[3], I refuse the binarism of geopolitical imaginaries and the epistemic authority attached to these. Most of the world refers to epistemic thinking and worldmaking outside of methodological nationalism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchal and caste supremacist contexts but also those which are outside standard Eurocentred and North Atlantic epistemologies.

In this working paper, I introduce and assemble a few key elements of anti-imperial epistemic justice which I argue is a necessary framework for producing knowledge on rights politics in "most of the world", and also for knowledge production on most of the world, more generally. I will highlight a few key intellectual resources and their challenges for thinking about anti-imperial epistemic justice including the critical interventions advanced by postdevelopment and pluriversal thinking.

2 Anti-Imperial Epistemic Justice

By anti-imperial epistemic justice, I do not mean prejudicial individual and micro level instances of being institutionally unheard or unjustly treated that can be combated through applying methodologically conservative and "ethically neutral ideology" (Crary 2018: 58) and intellectual resources or indeed through clearing intellectual obstacles to a neutral view of social and political relations[4]. On the contrary, anti-imperial epistemic justice is concerned with the "epistemic location" (Grosfoguel 2007) and the material and ethical contexts of knowledge production as well as with the epistemic presence and epistemic authority of knowledge production from most of the world. As an ethical and intellectual practice, it demands that epistemic interventions from "most of the world" must matter epistemically. Methodologically, anti-imperial epistemic justice signals a transnational orientation as well as an epistemic commitment to feminist anti-imperial scholarship for transnational justice[5]. Furthermore, it

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[2]My thinking on anti-imperial justice draws on my article: Madhok, S., 2024. 'Anti-imperial epistemic justice and re-making rights and justice 'after rights'. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, pp.1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2023.2299669

[3] Readers will know that I am here drawing in part on the sub-title of Partha Chatterjee's (2004) book '*The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world.* I find Chatterjee's formulation, 'most of the world' very effective in challenging the geopolitical and epistemic binaries of West/Non West. In my work, I both adopt but also build differently on Chatterjee's formulation, which I discuss in the main text.

[4] See for instance, Alice Crary's critique of methodological conservatism of Miranda Fricker's account of 'Epistemic Injustice' (2007)

[5] Here I am also partly drawing on Serene Khader's use of 'anti-imperialist feminist' to 'capture postcolonial, transnational and decolonial feminist positions'(2019: 19). To this list of literatures, I add Marxist feminist and anticolonial literatures to make up the 'anti-imperial epistemic' lens explored in this paper.

intervenes to critique the hardwired colonial unknowing (Vimalassery et al 2017) and the all-pervasive methodological nationalism, when people do talk about worldmaking in the Global South. The problem with methodological nationalism and the many "great men's stories" for national rights, pride and justice that are reinscribed and rehearsed over and over in academic and popular texts alike and which eclipse and erase "other" revolutionary actors and struggles, especially those fronted by revolutionary women, is not only that nation states are among the chief violators of rights through their security, development and corporate apparatuses and interests but also because of the dismal lack of legitimacy of the nation state when it comes to representing subaltern groups; a legitimacy deficit that is an outcome of subjecting subaltern groups to irresistible and unrelenting state violence, both contemporary and historical.

Key elements of anti-imperial epistemic justice are the following: Firstly, an insistence on conceptual production from most of the world, and this is a matter of an epistemic urgency—we urgently need conceptual work from site-specific contexts in most of the world. Secondly, anti-imperial epistemic justice demands an insistence on the epistemic presence and epistemic accounting of these most of the world concepts in ways that matter epistemically, ethically and politically. The epistemic presence of concepts from most of the world is crucial for disrupting existing epistemic hierarchies and for decolonising knowledge production. Thirdly anti-imperial epistemic justice is concerned with producing an epistemic shift in the sites of knowledge production from Europe to most of the world. It stipulates an insistence on ethical, methodological and political engagement with political concepts and vernaculars of rights and justice produced in most of the world that are cognate, yet not bound to mainstream received theories of rights as justice. Finally, anti-imperial epistemic justice demands a careful and systematic imperative at "speaking back" to the received and Eurocentred ethical, philosophical and political conceptual languages with a view to not only retooling them towards anti-imperial epistemic justice but also reorienting these so that they become partakers in a conversation on the different theorisations of justice, rights and worldmaking occurring around the globe.

3 Global Human Rights and Rights Politics in Most of the World

Over the last two decades, I have been tracking the critical conceptual vocabularies of rights politics in most of the world (Madhok 2021)[6]. This rights politics in most of the world, appears as the politics of structural justice. It is heavily invested in "life rights" (Mignolo 2014),

[6] In this working paper, the discussion of rights politics in most of the world draws on my book *Vernacular Rights Cultures: The Politics of Origins, Human Rights and Gendered Struggles for Justice*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

including the right to life itself, which it seeks to realise through interweaving a whole spectrum of existing rights, including citizenship rights but also through envisioning new directions for rights and bringing into being new rights. It is therefore, not the civilisational, racialised, minimalist, depoliticised, humanitarian politics of moralism and despair[7]. Rather, it is one that is located within political struggles for freedom, rights and justice, and underpinned by a conception of global justice as non-exploitational, and structural. Furthermore, this rights politics includes imaginaries of freedom rooted in structural justice and envisions a life outside of colonial occupation, settler colonialism, state corruption, corporate extractivism, intersectional inequalities, forced dispossession, statelessness and internal displacement, among other injustices. It is of course, telling that empirical realities of actually existing structural injustices have hardly found an outlet in mainstream theorising and activism on global human rights, which have historically been tightly bound to a civil-political rights centrism, and consequently, remained by and large unmoved by questions of structural injustices or intersecting, historical and complex inequalities.

As I have noted elsewhere, this rights politics in most of the world challenges two deeply embedded and structuring assumptions of global human rights, which I call the politics of origins and time-space provincialism (Madhok 2021). Both are key drivers of wilful colonial unknowing and of epistemic and structural injustice around the globe. The politics of origins is a racialised and binary global human rights discourse which stipulates that human rights originate, belong, travel from and operate for the West. This originary impulse is shared by not only the celebrants and the detractors of human rights but also by critical and progressive scholarship on human rights. The politics of origins, which is primarily a racial story, puts in place particular forms of racial, epistemic and political erasures. Significantly, it organises the global human rights discourse into a series of binary distinctions, the key ones being between West/non-West, universalism vs cultural particularism and, "Asian values" vs "Western political and civil human rights". It is these binary distinctions which structure global human rights talk, and are consequently, rehearsed over and over by global human rights talk and politics across the Global North and the Global South. For example, a commonplace way in which these binarisms appear is in asking the question: are human rights Western? This question is asked by both celebrants and detractors of human rights, i.e. by those who claim human rights as western in origin and gifted to the rest of the world, as well as by those who use the originary

[7] For various and differently oriented influential critiques that cover different sets of questions see Agamben 1998, Badiou 2012; Brown 2000; 2004; James 1938; Grewal 2004; Kapur 2018; Meister 2010; Mignolo 2000; Moyn 2018; Puar 2007; Razack 2004; Rancière 2004; Spivak 2004; Trouillot 1995; Wilson 2012 and Wynter 2003.

argument to refuse human rights, by arguing that human rights have no cultural or political traction in contexts outside the "West" because they are not part of original cultural or "non-western" values.

The binarism of rights talk has led to a spectacular failure to pay attention to the forms of rights politics, to the political cultures and to the modes of activism mobilised by subaltern groups in "most of the world", not least by nation states who have deployed the binarisms of rights talk to silence democratic aspirations to great spectacle and effect. The politics of origins is not without consequences, of course. In the hands of the celebrants, it places an argument of civilisational supremacy and epistemic hierarchy, and in that of the detractors, and particularly authoritarian nation states, it provides a politically expedient argument to delegitimize modes of protest and questioning of excessive state power on the basis that human rights are illegitimate, alien and foreign and therefore with little cultural traction and legitimacy. However, the politics of origins is not only shared by the celebrants and detractors of global human rights alone but also underpins the critical/progressive scholarship on human rights where this originary story shores up the "West" as the epistemic subject of human rights, although this time, via critique and by displaying wilful ignorance and historical amnesia around rights struggles in most of the world. So, for instance, one could be among the most celebrated critical human rights scholars and yet be under no obligation to know anything about the ongoing rights politics in most of the world let alone have it influence their scholarly work on human rights.

Before closing this section, I want to draw your attention to a specific effect of this politics of origins, which is the pervasive time–space provincialism that informs historiographical and philosophical human rights scholarship. By time-space provincialism, I simply mean that the epistemic centre of human rights intellectual thinking is temporally and geographically located in the modern "West". So even if the timeline of the originary stories of human rights might shift, the location of the human rights story remained steadfastly in place in the "West" with the result that the geopolitical context of epistemic enquiry continues to remain stationary.

The important work that this time–space provincialism does is that it invests epistemic authority in the Global North, thereby, resulting in a distinct lack of theoretical, philosophical and conceptual attention to rights struggles in most of the world. This widespread time–space provincialism in human rights scholarship shows up in the predominant focus on post–World War II Anglo-Euro-American stories of the growth and spread of global governance, international law and international institutions and of the "global" histories and politics of

globalisation, neoliberalism and global non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and, more recently, of accounts explicitly focused on the pursuit of global justice and the growth of Western sponsored international humanitarianism. These dominant stories of human rights that populate conservative and liberal accounts but are also rehearsed by radical democratic theorists (Balibar 2002; Rancière 2004; Brown 2015) have led to a widespread acceptance of a depoliticisation thesis that not only silences and eclipses accounts of the ongoing mobilisations for rights in "most of the world" but has also resulted in the absence of at least two kinds of enquiries. First, it has meant that (human) rights mobilisations in "most of the world" have yet to centrally preoccupy scholarship on human rights within radical democratic theory and political philosophy, which continue to be predominantly focused on the Euro-American experience of the "right to have rights" and on the paradoxes and aporias resulting from the founding or originary moments of republicanism (that is, on the abstract theoretical and philosophical problems set off by the French and the American revolutions). Second, despite the growing awareness for a need for scholarly work on human rights and rights in different parts of the globe, there exists a striking lack of scholarship that is explicitly aimed at not only tracking alternative genealogies of human rights but also producing conceptual work that captures the stakes and struggles over rights and human rights besides being able to critically engage, challenge and speak back to the scholarly field of global human rights.

4 Methodological Abstraction, Methodological Nationalism and Methodological Individualism

The critical vocabularies of rights politics in most of the world not only suture the politics of rights to the politics of justice but also envision alternative justificatory premises and political imaginaries of rights and human rights that privilege neither methodological nationalism and/or statism, nor methodological individualism or indeed methodological abstraction. Methodological nationalism makes rights conditional on the will of nation states and enables the legal exclusion of particular groups from rights (Agamben 1998), while methodological abstraction and methodological individualism lock standard and received theories of justice and rights into a "pre-social" framework of both persons and their conditions, and into existing outside structures of power, oppression, domination and injustice. The philosopher Charles Mills (2007) argues that the methodological abstraction of liberal theories, which inform "normal" [Shklar 1990] or "ideal" theories of justice, springs from their investment in the "epistemologies of white ignorance". These "epistemologies of white ignorance" enable philosophical refusals to ask questions about the forms of justice possible in a historically unjust

society (Mills 2017:34). Another source of methodological abstraction is the hardwired "colonial unknowing" (Vimalassery et al. 2016) underpinning knowledge production in the social sciences and humanities, which results in their deep methodological insularity from the histories and politics that inform scholarship produced in "most of the world", and in particular, from knowledge production on the existing forms and operation of structural justice around the globe. Oblivious of, or even defying any interest in or evidence of what Edward Said has called "contrapuntal thinking" – a concern with epistemic simultaneity around the globe -- Eurocentred scholarship either eschews in large part or prefers to quickly skim over persisting global coloniality, structural injustice and transhistorical injustice, including racial and gender injustice.

5 The Politics of Rights as the Politics of Justice

Standard Eurocentered conceptual thinking is unable to capture the alignment of the politics of rights and that of justice that emerges in subaltern mobilisations in most of the world. Not least because the dominant Eurocentric modes of theorising rights and justice insist on a conceptual separation between theories of rights and those of justice. Even though some philosophers note that philosophical discussions of global justice are more or less already "couched in the language of human rights" (Dorsey 2005: 562) and that "the global politics of justice in the latter half of the twentieth century became more and more involved with […] second generation rights" (Sen 2009: 380), to a great extent, however, theories of rights are seen as separate in scope, form and content from those theorising justice. Theories of rights are usually classified as those which draw up a distribution "list" of rights, whereas theories of justice are mostly regarded as demonstrating a concern with the general distribution of "things we prize – income and wealth, duties, and rights, powers and opportunities and offices and honours" (Sandel 2009: 19). In other words, theories of justice are seen as being concerned with "some very general principles governing the basic structure of society in regard to their impact on the life prospects of and the enjoyment of primary goods by individuals" (Waldron 2011: 774). A diverse set of thinkers including "Aristotelians, Hobbesians, Kantians utilitarians, liberals, conservatives, and theologians" reinforce what Judith Shklar calls the "normal model of justice" (Shklar 1990). Common to the "normal models of justice" is the "complacent view of injustice" (Shklar 1990:15), which Shklar argues, "take[s] it for granted that injustice is simply absence of justice and once we know what is just, we will know all we need to know" (Shklar 1990:15). Charles Mills (2017: 37) links this refusal of philosophical texts to theorise concrete and material injustice to a mode of thinking that "abstracts away from oppression". He argues that this

"problematic mode of idealizing abstractions" (xv) is neither "ideologically neutral nor is it without material consequences. It erases and "conceals" actually existing oppression as a starting point for philosophical thinking "and inhibits the development of conceptual tools necessary for understanding and dealing with its workings" (Mills 2017: xv). A case in point being that but for a few recent exceptions, theories of global justice typically do not as a rule theorise the injustice of continuing and still in place, settler colonialism or indeed the global effects of transhistorical injustice.

Recently, several important interventions focusing on non-ideal forms of thinking on justice, rights and equality have opened up a little methodological and theoretical space for retooling theories of justice and also for potentially theorising anti-imperial epistemic justice (Mills 2017; Sen 2009, Young 2011, Khader 2019; Shklar 1990; Lu 2017; Phillips 2021). For instance, Amartya Sen's The Idea of Justice (2009) offers a detailed and expansive critique of the social contractualist theories of justice and proposes to replace these with a different intellectual tradition linked to "social choice theories". Iris Marion Young's book Responsibility for Justice (2011) asks: "How shall agents both individual and organisational think about our responsibility in relation to structural injustice"? Young defines structural injustice as a "kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the repressive policies of a state." According to Young, structural injustice occurs as a "consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms" (Young 2011:52). More recently, Serene Khader's book "Decolonizing Universalism" (2019) develops an "anti-imperial transnational feminist praxis" that neither relinquishes a commitment to a universalism nor to a normative ethics. Khader is unequivocal that an anti-imperialist transnational praxis requires the formulation of normative judgments but if these are to be anti-imperialist then either new concepts will need to be developed by anti-imperialist feminists (36) or existing concepts will "need to be tailored" to avoid the commitments of what she calls "missionary feminism" . In my view, these non-ideal theories of justice offer potentially useful intellectual resources for theorising anti-imperial epistemic justice for the following reasons: Firstly, their refusal of methodological abstraction in favour of a methodological orientation that identifies and diagnoses actually existing forms and modalities of injustice and inequality as the starting point of theorising justice [and equality] enables an empirically informed theoretical accounting of the workings of injustice both in historical and in real time. Secondly, non-ideal theories demand that political concepts ought to help diagnose and respond to existing injustices (Khader 2019 :36 ; Sen 2009), which in turn aligns them with the desideratum of anti-imperial epistemic justice, mainly that building

conceptual interventions from anti-imperial contexts is key to decolonising knowledge projects. Thirdly, their refusal of methodological nationalism aligns with an intellectual pre-requisite of anti-imperial epistemic justice. Finally, acknowledging and theorising structural injustice (Young 2011) coincides with the investment of anti-imperial epistemic justice in challenging coloniality, structural injustice, exploitation and oppression.

6 The Epistemic Urgency of Conceptual Diversity

While non-ideal theories of justice and equality are helpful analytically and methodologically for theorising anti-imperial epistemic justice, it is also important to note that there is of course, an ongoing broader discussion on the prevailing global coloniality[8] of knowledge production, and one which is not often acknowledged in non-ideal accounts. This discussion highlights the "provincial" nature of knowledge production that masquerades as the global and the universal (Chakrabarty 200; Kapur 2018; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Lugones 2010; 2020; Vergès 2021; Tamale 2021; Escobar 2018; 2020), and is attentive to the oppressive and colonial "political economy of knowledge production" with its particular "material mechanisms and economic strategies" (Cusicanqui 2020:60). Anti-imperial epistemic justice owes a great deal to these critical interventions, both drawing upon and building on these critiques. Additionally, however, anti-imperial epistemic justice also demands that it is not enough to only focus on producing critiques of Eurocentrism and of the practices of extractivism backed by racialised universalism. The work of critique, although important, is nowhere sufficient. The epistemic challenge to coloniality of knowledge production requires concerted epistemic efforts to think systematically and epistemically about "multiplicity of ways of worlding" (Escobar 2020) which must not be viewed as niche and exotic exercises but rather as engaged in changing the "baseline of politics" (de la Cadena 2010). A key intervention for challenging and transforming the racialised, extractivist and colonial epistemic framework and blueprint (Escobar 2018) underpinning the organisation of global knowledge production is to produce concepts and conceptual descriptions of worldmaking from "most of the world".

The glaring absence of a broad repository of concepts drawn from different geographical and "non-standard" background contexts and conditions, i.e., contexts outside those of which concepts are standardly produced, described, and visualised, lies at the heart of the coloniality of knowledge production. Not least because it keeps Eurocentrism alive; maintains racialised

[8] The conceptual and theoretical work on coloniality is engaged by decolonial scholars who are mostly scholars working on Latin America but not exclusively so. The decolonial school of thinking includes the following: Alcoff 2012; Castro-Gómez 2007; Dussel 2003; Escobar 2017;2020; Grosfoguel 2011; Lugones 2010;2020; Maldonaldo-Torres 2008; Mignolo2011; Quijano 2000; Walsh 2010)

epistemic hierarchies, material inequalities and political economies of knowledge production (Cusicanqui 2012); actively produces "colonial unknowing" (Vimalessary et al 2016), epistemic violence, and conceptual misdescriptions; aggressively insists on the unidirectional travel, simplistic translation and radical commensurability of different worlds and forms of world-making; and authorises, and enacts powerful refusals of epistemic relationality and epistemic "simultaneity" across the globe. And, even though, there are now important and significant decolonising interventions focused on "theorising from the global south", however, in my view, the problem lies not so much in producing theories from the global south but in producing concepts from the global south. There simply are not enough concepts in place that are situated in and emerge from life contexts in most of the world. Concepts are the "building blocks" of theory and make our world "visualisable and discussable" (Rabinow, 2011: 122) and, therefore, the work of theory building requires concepts able to capture different political and social imaginaries of life, living, and world-making in different locations around the globe. The production of new concepts describes different ways of being in the world are no abstract and strictly intellectual or analytic affairs but rather are forged within everyday political struggles and modes of sociality. As Upendra Baxi importantly reminds, "in the making of ethics of human rights, clarity emerges not just as an analytical virtue but stands dialectically constituted by processes of struggle" (2007:48). These conceptual articulations of rights politics in most of the world challenge not only existing coloniality but also third world statism and its modes of dispossession through developmentalism and transnational corporate extractivism. The political struggles which align rights and justice are not primarily claims for interpersonal injustices, although these are not absent, of course, but rather these rights claims draw attention to broader questions of worldmaking and ontological designs underpinned by structural injustice.

My insistence on a concerted effort to produce new conceptual knowledges with which to build the world anew is neither novel nor original. It has been a key facet of anti-colonial thinking. For instance, consider Frantz Fanon’s powerful call to "work out new concepts" in the concluding lines of *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1961) where he writes:

> "It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe’s crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man […]. So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her […]. For Europe, for ourselves and for

> humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (255).

At different points in the *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes specific observations on the intellectual content and inspiration of these new concepts. The new concepts, are neither pulled out of Eurocentred intellectual repertoires nor are they products of some "populist abstraction" or indeed of ossified notions of the "cultural" or "traditional". Fanon is unequivocal that these concepts emerge from and draw their intellectual inspiration from people's struggles for freedom (Fanon 1961:189). Fanon's refusal to "attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again"(1961,190) is shared by the other famous Martiniquan intellectual, Aimé Césaire who powerfully argued that while the important task was to mount a defence of African civilisations, this work however, did not consist of a return to any mythical or traditional past. In a *Discourse on Colonialism*, published in 1951 Césaire writes: "For us the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to review. We leave that to those who go in for exoticism […]. It is a new society that we must create" (1951:52).

7 Postdevelopment, The Pluriverse and Social Movements as Pluriversal Grounds for Theory

For many scholars, including Fanon, social movements or people's struggles for freedom constitute the epistemic site for the formulation of new concepts. In their scholarship, social movements are important and crucial repositories for alternative imaginaries, designs, frameworks for equality, democracy and justice (Escobar 2020, Phillips 2021). While some scholars explicitly refer to Indigenous movements as repository sites of theory building, others point to non-specific and generic social movements (Phillips 2021). For instance, Arturo Escobar (2020) in his book, *The Pluriverse* calls for the epistemic authority of the knowledges produced by Indigenous social movements to be recognised and acknowledged. Even though, he notes that there is no "blueprint" for pluriversal politics, Escobar argues that there are in fact, active and ongoing social experiments with pluriversal thinking taking place within social movements. Consequently, in his book (2020), he sets out to reflect on the tools and concepts produced within these pluriversal social movements. For Escobar, the pluriverse is a framework for an ontological politics that recognises "multiplicity of ways of worlding" (2020: XIII). He defines ontology as a way of knowing, being, doing, and ontological politics as one of "radical relationality" and "autonomous place based thinking" (2020: xiv-xxxiii). The autonomous place

based and territorial struggles that contribute to Escobar's "notion of the pluriverse" are mainly based in South West Colombia. And, his citations of these movements are mainly from their manifestoes that have been published at various points of time in recent years.

In Escoabar's account, the "notion of the pluriverse" has two main sources: theoretical critiques of dualism including post-dualist trends stemming from the "ontological turn" in social theory, and social movement ontologies and epistemologies of the South including non-dualist philosophies and cosmologies, which "reflect a deeply relational understanding of life such as Muntu, Ubuntu, the Panchamama or Uma Kiwe" (2020: 75-76). These intellectual resources enable efforts to think not only beyond the academy and its forms of knowledge production but as Escobar notes, they also allow a mode of thinking that centres "the pueblos-territoria (territory-peoples) and the intellectual activists linked to them". Furthermore, he writes that the "ontological occupations of territories and worlds […] takes place in the name of development […]" whereas the pluriversal thinking that emerges within social movements "make another world possible" and open up a space for "moving beyond" development, capitalist economies, and the state. The pluriverse is a "tool, first for making alternatives to the one world plausible to one-worlders, and second, for providing resonance to those other worlds that interrupt the one-world story" (2020:75). All of this "implies a transition from one-world concepts such as "globalization" and "global studies" to concepts centred on the pluriverse" (2020:75).

Escobar's book "Pluriversal Politics" (2020) is his second iteration of the "notion of the pluriverse". In his earlier book titled *Designs for a Pluriverse* (2018), published two years earlier, he argued that the multiple crises of ecological devastation, dispossession and capitalist extractivism that have gripped the modern world, are the result of particular ways of "doing, knowing and being", which in turn are a result of hegemonic forms of organising the world based on a particular design. This design is driven by a particular ontological orientation towards singularity of existence and of there being only one world—that of the modern. In contrast, to this singular design, pluriversal thinking is an imaginary that replaces singularity thinking with a register of different ontologies engaged in different designs for world-making which are also in partial connection with one another.

Readers of Escobar's longstanding scholarship on alternative epistemic imperatives and imaginaries would know that the many elements of his pluriversal thinking have longer antecedents than even these two recent books. As a theorist most closely associated with "postdevelopment", Escobar's powerful essays have set out important critiques of Eurocentric thought underpinning international development discourses, policies and practices. In a series

of influential writing (1992, 1995, 2007, 2015, 2017, 2020), he has drawn attention to the ontological and epistemological imperative to leave behind the "imaginary of development" (1992) and to visualise a time *after* development.

Postdevelopment, writes Escobar, is part of the "Transition Discourses" (2015, 2020) emanating from multiple academic and activist sites in the Global South and Global North that call for a "significant paradigmatic or civilisational transformation" (2015: no page nos). He draws a distinction between "Transition Discourses" that emerge from the Global North and those which originate in the Global South. For instance, he identifies postdevelopment as a key transition discourse emanating from the Global South, while degrowth is a prominent actor among the transition discourses emerging and operating in the Global North. Despite their differences, however, most transition discourses are linked by the "contention that we need to step out of existing institutional and epistemic boundaries […] and a transition to an altogether different world" (2015: no pg nos). As an intellectual and an ethical epistemic project, postdevelopment draws attention to the ways in which development as a body of discourses, practices and institutions has resulted in producing the Global South as "underdeveloped" (Escobar 1995, 2015). It intervenes to critique and demystify the various formations of power that undergird the discipline, discourse and practice of global development, and also to explore alternatives to development. As a critical body of scholarship, postdevelopment makes at least two crucial contributions: firstly, it puts forward an uncompromising analysis and a systematic critique of the power relations and interests that inform and drive development theory and practice and, secondly, it insists on a "non-Eurocentric and more power-sensitive theory of positive social change". Significantly, and as Aram Ziai argues, a key achievement of postdevelopment scholarship is that it has produced a "sociology of development knowledge" (2015: 846). Moreover, despite the efforts of development theory to declare postdevelopment scholarship "obsolete" (Ziai 2015:833), its influence can be detected in the growing resonance of key postdevelopment critiques in the more recent critical publications within development studies. Paradoxically, however, such is the resistance to postdevelopment ideas that even while established development studies scholars increasingly deploy key elements of postdevelopment critique, they do so while withholding an acknowledgement of postdevelopment scholarship as being the source or origin of these critiques (Ziai 2017a). As Ziai notes, the influence of postdevelopment scholarship is now an incontrovertible fact, and regardless of the attempts to refuse acknowledgement, cite and validate postdevelopment critiques, it is no longer possible to ignore the critiques of the development project and of development studies by postdevelopment scholars.

Puriversal thinking "moves beyond" not only development but also circumvents the "impasse" that development studies finds itself in. Aram Ziai writes that this impasse within development studies is the result of the inability of the discipline of development studies to engage deeply and properly with the question of "pluralism" (2017b). However, as Ziai cautions, addressing the question of "development pluralism" is an expansive undertaking, which involves taking seriously the imperative to not only critique Eurocentric practices and discourses that underpin it but to also think carefully on the existing "global inequality beyond the discourse of development". Such an epistemic project has several complex elements and will require "theorising contemporary struggles and envisioning different futures based on non-capitalist values, communal ownership and a humbler relation of human beings to nature" (2017b: 2552).

Unsurprisingly, both postdevelopment and Escobar's intervention have met with a range of critiques and not only from development studies alone.[9] These have also emanated from postcolonial scholars who have raised questions of representation and romanticisation of Indigenous struggles in his work (Asher et al 2019). And, while I do not wish to rehearse these critiques here, I do want to raise a few questions on the politics of care and ethical epistemic work which I believe are critical to a careful, ethical and a non-extractivist engagement with social movements as an alternative ground for concepts and theory building. These questions straddle ethical, methodological, epistemological and political concerns and are the following: How to do the work of theorising from social movements without falling into the epistemic traps of either romanticising social movements as power-free horizontal ontologies outside of articulation of power or converting them into them into the "local", "cultural" or niche epistemologies? How to ethically and faithfully document, translate and theorise the conceptual tools used by social movements to enunciate their epistemic and political presence and demands? And, finally, how to theorise the conceptual tools that emerge from social movements without rendering these *native* and *unfamiliar* but rather as active participants in the knowledge production in the social sciences? This is by no means an exhaustive list of questions that I pose here, however, in my view, these are part an ethical and epistemic toolkit required in order to provide an ethical epistemic accounting of the conceptual tools used by social movements and for engaging with these concepts epistemically so that they appear as an epistemic presence.

[9] See for instance, Pieterse (2000). For a critical discussion of these critiques, see Ziai (2017b).

8 Epistemic Presence and the Epistemic Accounting of Rights Politics

Let me turn to an illustrative account of what I mean by epistemic presence and epistemic accounting and why these are key to anti-imperial epistemic justice. I am mindful that at this point, you might ask: how to make the epistemic presence of rights politics appear and matter epistemically? And, my answer is this: an important way to do this is through scholarly work aimed at producing conceptual descriptions of the languages of rights and human rights deployed across the globe. And, in particular, through conceptual work on the critical vocabularies, political activisms and philosophical perspectives that animate rights politics around the globe. It bears worth repeating that the production of concepts from "most of the world" is a matter of urgency. We simply do not have the concepts we need in order to produce theorised accounts of our different and historically specific encounters with the world. The conceptual descriptions are important because they illuminate the rights politics in most of the world and especially, the political struggles of exploited, marginalised and subaltern groups which are seldom viewed as epistemic sites of knowledge production and epistemic authority. These subaltern political struggles for freedom, rights and justice in most of the world have their own specific political imaginaries and conceptual vocabularies that cannot be reduced to simple translational strategies and which require an epistemic accounting. Therefore, the work on concepts in most of the world is neither the work of simplistic unidirectional translation of Eurocentric concepts in "local" languages nor is it the work that exists in conceptual and political silos or inhabits radical unintelligibility or indeed is one of forcing violent commensurability in relation to dominant concepts and epistemologies. If anything, it is an epistemic-ethical-political exercise that aims to foreground and centre the conceptual work from most of the world to provincialise Eurocentric concepts and also retool these through foregrounding rights politics in most of the world and the stakes and struggles that animate these. The critical engagement with conceptual work from most of the world and its retooling of existing Eurocentred concepts has the potential of not only stretching the background conditions for conceptual work and of theory building to include conditions of global coloniality, epistemic inequality, and structural injustice but also of shifting the standard background context of philosophical, conceptual and empirical location of rights and justice talk to most of the world.

For the best part of two decades, I have been engaged in a project of epistemic accounting of subaltern rights struggles in most of the world, and specifically, in India and Pakistan. In order to give an epistemic accounting of this politics of rights, I have devised a theoretical framework for their study, which I call vernacular rights cultures, as well as a methodological device, which

I call feminist historical ontology (Madhok 2021). The lens of vernacular rights cultures allows the curation, assembly and documentation of different registers, imaginaries and possibilities of and for rights encounters and politics in the world. The "vernacular" in *vernacular rights cultures* is first and foremost, of course, an epistemic positioning. It signals an epistemic position in relation to the hegemonic global human rights discourse. Crucially, the vernacular also flags the different literal and conceptual languages of rights deployed by subaltern groups across the globe. It foregrounds the enunciation of claiming a place in the world through a particular site-specific politics A feminist historical ontology on the other hand, couples investigations into historical ontology with a critical reflexive politics of location. As a methodological device it allows us to examine how concepts come into being in particular locations, produce specific political cultures, and "make up people", while also putting in place different possibilities for justice and democracy.

My epistemic accounting of subaltern rights struggles[10] has involved ethnographically tracking these through North West India and Central Eastern Pakistan. What unites these subaltern mobilisations spanning India and Pakistan is the critical vocabularies of rights that they employ to enunciate their rights and forge their rights politics. All the subaltern mobilisations I have been tracking use the Urdu and Arabic word for a right, which is the word *haq.* It is striking is that even though they have their own specific languages, which are Punjabi, Rajasthani, Bhili-Bhilodi, Hindi and Urdu, they all however, all use the word *haq* to claim rights. Consequently, I have been tracking the deployment of *haq* through the deserts of Rajasthan in northwest India where different subaltern groups have been mobilising to demand rights to food, public information, gender and caste equality and employment from the state, and Adivasi groups are demanding rights to sacred and ancestral forests, streams, rivers and lands. The word *haq* does not recognise national borders and formations; if anything, it undermines these and methodological imperatives which are framed around it. And so I have travelled with it further north-west into the subcontinent – and into the central eastern province of Punjab in Pakistan, where for the last two decades years very poor peasants have been involved in a long struggle for land rights against the military, which is also the largest landowner in postcolonial Pakistan. The critical vocabularies of *haq* of these rights struggles are co-produced through and invoked within multiple and diverse encounters with developmentalism, militarism, state authoritarianism, statism, legal constitutionalism, and social movement activism, and therefore,

[10] These subaltern mobilisations consist of a range of different actors and groups engaged in movement building for rights entitlements from the state. They include Indigenous and *Dalit m*obilisations demanding rights to food, employment, public information/accountability and land rights in India and Pakistan. I have written about these mobilisations in detail in Madhok (2021, 2017, 2009).

it is at the intersection of these and not as some freestanding abstraction, that *haq* as a contemporary idea operates.

Readers would of course know that the word *haq is* hardly confined to South Asia alone. Remarkably cosmopolitan, the word can be traced to classical Hebrew and has been known to appear in pre-Islamic poetry and in the Quran. It's also found in the older Semitic languages such as Aramaic and Mendian (Madhok 2021). *Haq* is a capacious, dynamic and an expansive concept. Over the centuries, its meanings have evolved to include a range of normative, ethical, moral, empirical, ontological, and divine meanings such as something right, true, just, proper and correct; and also rectitude, due, equity, justice, reason, title, privilege, claim, portion, truth, and God. *Haq, hak* or *hukk i*s the principal word for a right used across the Middle East, North and East Africa, Iran, and South Asia, appearing in at least eight contemporarily used languages, including Hebrew, Persian, Arabic, Swahili, Manipuri, Turkish, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. It appears in Hindustani and Urdu lexicon through the influence of Persian in the Indian subcontinent where it cuts across geographical, religious and linguistic boundaries to become the principal word deployed to claim rights by subaltern groups in north-western India and Pakistan.

My conceptual work on *haq* has involved documenting the different justificatory premises of *haq* that animate but also sustain these different political mobilisations, while also putting in place a particular relation to the self. These justificatory premises at times intersect with liberal democratic theorising on rights and human rights but also turn away towards a radically different direction. But they also offer us possibilities for conceptualising rights politics away from the depoliticised/depoliticising, minimalist, legalist, and state centric discourses of human rights and towards those that centre questions of justice — historic, epistemic and material. I have documented four justificatory premises that underpin the deployment of *haq* and these are: constitutional/legal citizenship; justification of rights on the basis of morality and "Truth"; justification based on the entitlements of the prior; and justification based on Islam. All of these emerge within live political contexts of struggle and precarity and provide insights into how vernacular rights cultures come into being (Madhok 2021).

The justificatory premises of *haq* refuse methodological nationalism and statism by locating the authority and source of rights outside the nation state even as they regard it as the responsibility of the state to protect and uphold rights. For instance, while citizenship and legal constitutionalism is an important justificatory premise of rights — even though *haq* is used in the context of citizenship, and justified and activated through citizenship, it is, however, not

state dependent. This understanding of *haq* not only breaks out of the organic connection often drawn by legal positivists between the state and citizenship rights but also places itself outside of the Arendtian paradox of "the right to have rights" (Arendt 195:296), which operates within methodological nationalism and already assumed and existing categories of who are and can be citizens (Rancière 2004). The justifications of *haq* are complex and uphold legal constitutionalism of rights while refusing rights as derivative from the state. In other words, *haq* doesn't only posit symmetric and correlative relations between itself and the positive legal order of the state. Evidently, the non-derivativeness of *haq* from the state and its entanglements of rights and justice has implications for mainstream and received theories of rights, which tend to recognise the existence of rights only if there are corresponding duty holders (Madhok 2021, 2024). It also has implications for theorising rights outside of methodological individualism since *haq* is not limited to claims to entitlements guaranteed by the state and thereby, for differently organised politics and social arrangements. The annunciations of *haq* with their demand for different political arrangements become visible in the non-dichotomous and relational connections that are drawn between individuals (as bearers and claimants of *haq*) and conceptualising the public good. In some, claiming *haq* signifies a cosmic inseparability and indivisibility from the public good and consequently, the public good is conceived as exceeding the welfare and interests of moral individuals alone and comes to include obligations to nature. The refusal of methodological individualism also disrupts the conceptual connections that are often assumed but also explicitly drawn between liberty and rights, which in turn, often rest on both methodological individualism and nationalism (Madhok 2024). The articulations of *haq* in Indigenous mobilisations in North Western India that I have been tracking and documenting also draw attention to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands by the state in the name of development, and to the overwhelming state violence directed at subaltern groups claiming collective ownership rights over ancestral lands, forests, rivers and streams. Through claiming their individual and collective ownership over communal lands, they are also asserting a political imaginary of freedom and liberty which is expansive and non-atomistic, and one that extends to the collective wellbeing of all sentient beings, including the natural world.

The articulation of *haq* both as an expansive language of claim making but also as a demand for justice is embedded in powerful descriptions of existing structural injustice and powerful critiques of state corruption, corporate extractivism, dispossession and forced displacement to make way for development and conservation projects. A striking transformation of the meaning of *haq* occurs when it's seized by Dalit and Adivasi women to articulate claim rights and gender

justice. For instance, it was often brought up in my fieldwork as to how *haq* was a word that upper caste men would use to refer to their property rights. And that it was unthinkable that it could be used by subaltern women to name and challenge existing structural injustices and intersecting oppressions. At this point, I want to make clear that to speak of relational and communal imaginaries of *haq* is not the same as saying that these relational connections are somehow existing horizontal connections already in place but rather that the meanings of *haq* as justice are forged in political struggles to claim communal rights in political struggles. However, it is in these political struggles, against the state that some of these relational connections are re-articulated, resignified, contested and demanded. It is also within and through these re-articulations of relationality that a space opens up for rights demands by those who have never been the intended subjects of rights. Therefore, not unsurprisingly, this space of rights articulations that is opened up through struggle is also one of intense conflict, contestation and injury (Madhok 2013, 2021).

Rights politics in most of the world is not a utopian horizontal power free politics, and vernacular rights cultures is a key framework for capturing and articulating these conflicts and struggles for freedom and justice engaged by different groups and of the different and varied stakes and struggles driving rights politics in most of the world. Subaltern rights politics like all rights politics is an intersectionally gendered phenomenon and mired in conflictual, contested and violent power relations. However, it is also a generative politics and it is at the heart of this generative and deeply conflictual rights politics that the abstract and normative individual and collective subject of rights and of *haq* emerges and is also exposed to contest and challenge by existing intersecting hierarchies and oppressions. And, therefore, even while *haq* generates political possibilities and shifts the normative horizons of rights talk to expand the list of entitlements and its beneficiaries, however, these normative possibilities offered by *haq* are deeply gendered and marked by intersectional conflicts. The point I want to make here is that the critical vocabularies of *haq* are forged in intense political struggles waged over the normative identity of the rights bearing subject both within social mobilisations but also in the broader political arenas. In many ways, the conflictual and contested nature of the politics of *haq* reflects the experience and effects of rights politics more broadly, where it is often the hegemonic subjects, even those within subaltern groups, who have been successfully able to mobilise rights discourses to entrench their dominance, and where the struggles for rights by gendered subalterns have been engaged in staking claim to rights that rightfully belong to them but which have been systematically denied to them.

I must make it absolutely clear that vernacular rights cultures are no authentic, essentialist or pure hermetically sealed sites in the global south. In fact, quite the converse; the coercive entanglements of the histories of colonialism together with the penetrative capacities of state developmentalism and transnational capital have not only rendered talk of authenticity impossible but have also at the same time laid bare the magnitude of epistemic and ontological violence unleashed on subaltern groups. Developmentalism and dispossession constitute important sites of subaltern rights talk in South Asia, and are also the grounds on which subaltern groups resist and challenge the irresistible power and legitimacy of the national state.

9 Vernacular Rights Cultures and Pluriversal Struggles

An epistemic accounting of the rights politics of *haq* shows neither a yearning for ossified cultures and exoticised concepts, nor an abstract yearning for a return to an imagined mythical past. Rather it shows up the epistemic presence of ethical and dynamic critical conceptual vocabularies of worldmaking, which are wrought within subaltern struggles for freedom and justice, and are aimed at overturning structural injustice, extractivism, coloniality and dispossession. Significantly, an epistemic accounting of rights politics in most of the world brings into being new imaginaries, subjectivities and subjects of rights and citizenship together with different visions of justice that urgently demand not only to matter epistemically but also to the epistemic urgency of anti-imperial epistemic justice.

Even though there are significant intellectual, political ethical alignments and overlaps between the epistemic accounting of vernacular rights cultures and the pluriversal projects described by Arturo Escobar (2020), there are also some differences between these. For instance, Escobar's pluriversal struggles are mainly accounts of Indigenous collectives in Colombia who are engaged in ecological struggles and in particular, of groups who are able to produce and publish formal manifestos and public declarations[11]. Importantly, these Indigenous struggles expressedly disengage from the nation state to a large extent. In contrast, the vernacular rights cultures that I have been tracking explicitly engage the state and its institutions, and more often than not, direct their demands for rights and entitlements at the state. Moreover, Escobar's accounting of the pluriversal project does not provide much space for accounts of conflict and different power formations, and especially of gendered formations and contestatons, in these struggles. Social movements are not power free zones and therefore, paying attention to gendered subjects within political mobilisations allows a focus on multiple struggles taking

[11] See descriptions of these groups and their pluriversal struggles in Escobar (2020).

place within these mobilisations to seize, resignify and stretch *haq* by those who have never been the intended or normative subjects of *haq*. Perhaps nowhere are these conflicts and contestations more marked or acute than over the *haq* claims by subaltern women for gender equality. Another difference between vernacular rights cultures and the pluriversal projects in Escobar's accounts (2020) is to do with the status of "intellectual activists" within pluriversal accounts and those within vernacular rights cultures. Methodologically, I have always resisted focusing on "intellectual activists" not least because the contexts of struggles I have been tracking have been such that the emergence of "organic intellectuals" able to both lead and represent the demands of these movements have been few and far between. The gulf between the leaders of many grassroots movements who often tend to be metropolitan intellectuals and are key figures in building movements ground up and providing leadership and support of various kinds, and the majority of grassroots and "place based activists" who neither occupy leadership nor intellectual roles is striking in subaltern movements in most of the world. This class divide between the two is often exacerbated by gender, metropolitan location, caste and access to elite education and networks. For instance, in sharp contrast to the leadership of the majority of subaltern struggles I have been documenting, the grassroots activists in these struggles (although, not in all cases) were often separated from their leadership in respect of their caste, class and gendered identities but also by the fact that the majority of the very experienced grassroots activists I was tracking in my ethnographies tended to be politically literate rather than formally literate and had less than formal school leaving qualifications. Finally, despite the centrality of the epistemic production and concepts and tools of social movements within the "notion of the pluriverse", actually existing pluriversal politics often predominantly comes across as an already established consensus and one that is articulated and operated through a "neat", albeit, an alternative ontological design (see also Sauviat 2007). Perhaps, this maybe to do with the lack of accounting of internal conflict and multi-layered struggles in some of these pluriversal accounts.

10 Conclusion

This working paper assembles different intellectual resources for theorising anti-imperial epistemic justice. These intellectual resources are not only generative of ethical work on rights politics in most of the world but through foregrounding conceptual work on their political imaginaries, political struggles and critical vocabularies of rights, they allow rights politics in most of the world to appear as an epistemic presence and to matter epistemically.

My argument in this working paper has been a threefold one. Firstly, that the conceptual separation of rights and justice into separately organised theories is a forced one, and emerges from a particular and long history of thinking, which Charles Mills has called racial liberalism. Secondly, given this history of racial liberalism, it is crucial to retool thinking on both rights and justice through different intellectual resources, and in particular from intellectual and ethical resources that emerge from people's struggles for justice and freedom. And, finally, the commitment to anti-imperial epistemic justice requires not only an epistemic accounting of this rights politics in most of the world but also includes a commitment to foregrounding the epistemic presence of this rights politics.

Significantly, I want to emphasise this: to speak of vernacular rights cultures and of pluriversal ways of being in the world is to neither remove these alternative politics and their epistemologies from normative ethical judgments (this is not the same as judgmentalism or moralism) nor from ongoing mainstream philosophical disagreements. It is quite the converse. If anything, removing these from present and ongoing philosophical engagements in mainstream discourse and scholarship is a classic colonial move that isolates and classifies these critical other epistemologies as "niche" "cultural" or "ethnic", and as those which require no epistemic engagement and are to be left alone to exist in isolation and only in their own terms; they are to never exist relationally alongside other philosophical ideas and to never ever influence or matter epistemically to the regular business of global knowledge production[12]. Having said this, however, the systematic epistemic isolation, silencing and rendering absent by hegemonic knowledge production are hardly the only difficulties facing pluriversal and decolonial thinking. In light of the recent co-option of decolonial thinking by authoritarian right-wing groups to justify regressive political agendas drawing on romanticised visions of a "golden tradition" and "authentic cultural values", we also need to be attentive to not only the intellectual resources that we draw on for imagining anti-imperial epistemic and structural justice, but also how these intellectual resources are taken up by regressive political agendas. In my view, there will always be "co-optations" of emancipatory and historically specific languages and experiences of oppression by reactionary constituencies. However, an effective guard against such regressive appropriations is to always insist on a full and careful epistemic accounting of the specific and different politics and intellectual genealogies that undergird both the formation and use of intellectual ideas and concepts but also of the politics driving the

[12] Here I am referring to sidelining and silencing of both anti-imperial political theory and philosophical thought but also alternative epistemologies in the mainstream or Eurocentred philosophical thinking. For this critique, see Charles Mills (2015).

practice of conceptual production in different parts of the globe, including within social movements. The work of conceptually theorising rights politics in most of the world must be one that is historically specific and located in people's struggles for rights and justice. It must also be one that is firmly tethered to the broader project of anti-imperial epistemic justice.

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