GEOGRAPHIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND ASYMMETRICAL EPISTEMIC ORDERS

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ABSTRACT

Global knowledge continues to flow along unequal and often invisible hierarchies. The concept of epistemic injustice highlights the ethical and moral consequences of such asymmetries, showing how certain groups' knowledge is undervalued, with implications for careers, wellbeing, and social recognition. This paper examines how knowledge is constructed, contested, and maintained across universities, research institutes, cultures, languages, and geopolitical contexts. Extending beyond postcolonial frameworks, we explore a variety of contexts in which epistemic marginalization shapes knowledge and authority. Adopting a geo-epistemic perspective, we show how entrenched biases influence what counts as legitimate knowledge and who gets to decide, while also revealing constraints faced by scholars across diverse settings. This approach supports rethinking expertise, confronting exclusionary norms, and cultivating a more inclusive, dialogical, and globally aware academic practice.

Keywords: epistemic injustice; geo-epistemics; higher education; higher education; university

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is never produced in a vacuum (1–5). It emerges within complex social, institutional, and spatial contexts, shaped by historical legacies, political structures, and material conditions, yet it often aspires to universality and claims global relevance (6–9). Whilst claiming factual universality might be rhetorically powerful, philosophically such notions are a lot thornier [10]. In this paper, we adopt Mignolo's assertion [11, p. 1] that "all knowledges are situated and every knowledge is constructed". The conceptual lens of the geographies of knowledge emphasizes that knowledge is fundamentally spatially situated; its creation, validation, and circulation are inseparable from the specific places, institutions, and networks in which it is embedded [12]. From the layout of research universities and the distribution of funding to the invisible hierarchies of academic publishing and the dominance of certain languages, these spatial and institutional arrangements profoundly influence whose knowledge is recognized, valued, and disseminated [13–15].
(Geo)epistemic asymmetry is a typical manifestation of the global knowledge order. In terms of philosophical conceptions and theoretical approaches, this order is dominated by Western-centric frameworks, which require scholars from the rest as "local informers" of

empirical information commissioned for the needs of certain research in the so-called "area studies" [16]. The established global order is asymmetrical, an amalgamation of diverse knowledge systems, traditions, theories, conceptual frameworks, and specific agendas produced by scholars in different macroregions of the world [17]. As a constituent part of this global order, there are knowledge systems within smaller cultural and spatial domains which, in line with Mignolo's terminology [11, p. 4], include the so-called "places of non-thought (of myth, non-western religions, folklore, underdevelopment involving regions and people)".

This paper examines the asymmetries in established geographies of knowledge, with a particular focus on higher education. Here, the university is understood as a geographic site of knowledge production. Applying a "geographies of knowledge" lens to this subject explores, amongst other things, how institutional power, linguistic dominance, regional hierarchies, and geopolitical positioning shape not only the production of knowledge but also its circulation and perceived legitimacy. Within this broader framework, asymmetrical epistemic orders emerge as a particularly compelling illustration of how spatial hierarchies structure the international academic landscape. In other words, spatial arrangements and processes are understood to be causally related to the (unequal) distribution of authority, recognition, and legitimacy in global knowledge, through both deliberate action and unintended consequences. These asymmetries reveal that knowledge is not simply about truth or intellectual rigor; it is also deeply intertwined with questions of power, access, and symbolic authority [18–20]. Understanding these dynamics requires careful attention to the material and relational infrastructures through which knowledge flows, as well as to the persistent structural and cultural biases that determine what is considered valid, important, or universally applicable in the global scholarly community.

For purposes of demarcation, this paper restricts itself to merely mentioning the geographical and institutional anchoring of knowledge production (section 2), resulting asymmetrical epistemic orders on a global scale (section 3), and higher education as a critical node (section 5). Finally, we offer some suggestions about what can be done to achieve a more equitable form of knowledge production that is not ignorant of these geographical pressures (section 5), before presenting our conclusion (section 6).

KNOWLEDGE AS GEOGRAPHICALLY AND INSTITUTIONALLY ANCHORED

Higher education institutions occupy a central and inescapable position in the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge, which is why their mission and purpose have remained greatly contested questions over the centuries [21–27]. Yet the spatial and geographic conditions under which knowledge acquires authority, legitimacy, and societal impact are rarely examined in a systematic manner. Knowledge is never placeless; it is profoundly anchored in specific locations, institutional frameworks, and socio-political arrangements [28]. Universities, research centers, and other knowledge-producing institutions act as both sites and conduits of knowledge, mediating its creation and circulation through complex networks of funding, infrastructure, policy, and academic norms [29] These networks are far from neutral or evenly distributed, privileging certain regions, languages, and epistemic traditions while marginalizing others, and in doing so reproducing historical hierarchies and structural inequalities in global knowledge systems [30]. Finally, people interact in a ritualistic fashion that

involves administrative, bureaucratic, and embodied interaction at the physical place of the university, with scaling interactions that are difficult to appreciate in day-to-day conduct [31].

Spatial theory offers a particularly illuminating lens through which to understand these dynamics by emphasizing that space is not simply a physical or material container but also a conceptual, ideological, and socially lived construct. To put it poetically, the tapestry of existence [32] is shaped by our own choices [33] as we are shaped by it [34] in a perpetual feedback loop. Hence, knowledge is shaped not only by the material infrastructures of research laboratories [35], libraries [36], digital networks and institutional repositories [38], but also by the ideologies [39] norms [40] and expectations [41] embedded in academic evaluation [42], disciplinary boundaries [43] and global rankings [44]. In the race for better positioning within the global knowledge order, more and more countries are investing in scholars and research facilities and promoting internationalization to establish at least one world-class research university. Such an achievement is "seen as central to the global knowledge economy and the production and dissemination of new knowledge" [45, p. 9].

Simultaneously, knowledge is experienced relationally, through the professional networks [46], collaborations [47] and identities of scholars themselves [48]. In this sense, the demarcation between fact and fiction is a constantly negotiated process [49], where knowledge production is always mediated through the interplay of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, which together determine what is recognized and valued within international academic networks. For various non-dominant communities situated in geo-epistemological spaces beyond the Global North, the knowledge framework proposed by de Sousa Santos [50] known as knowledge-as-emancipation, may serve as a potential solution. This framework empowers marginalized communities to resist the Western tradition of enforcing knowledge as a norm (knowledge-as-regulation), or the second paradigm of knowledge during the modern period. Knowledge-as-emancipation encompasses a journey from a state of ignorance, which the author termed 'colonialism', to a state of understanding that he called 'solidarity' [50].

In a geographic sense, the mainstreaming of locally produced knowledge endeavors to achieve global relevance, and in the process, it frequently encounters significant structural and epistemic obstacles. For example, scholarship originating outside the Global North often confronts systemic barriers that limit its recognition and legitimacy [51]. This applies regardless of whether the place of origin is the Global South, Eastern Europe, post-socialist nations, or marginalized communities within dominant countries. Such knowledge may be dismissed or devalued through labels such as "local," "peripheral," or "secondary," which effectively marginalize contributions that do not conform to dominant epistemic standards [52]. Conversely, research produced in Western, Anglophone, or historically dominant institutions is more readily valorized, often framed as universal, authoritative, or inherently superior. These dynamics reveal that both material spatiality and the geography of meaning are inseparable from questions of epistemic legitimacy. Here, the constellations of contemporary knowledge are deeply shaped by context, power relations, and historical legacies [53].

Institutional and infrastructural arrangements further reinforce these spatial hierarchies [54]. The architecture of global academic recognition, such as journal indexing systems [55], peer review practices [56], university rankings [57], and research assessment frameworks [58] systematically privileges established centers of knowledge while marginalizing peripheral institutions and scholars. Metrics and indicators, though often

presented as objective or meritocratic, function as instruments of epistemic power, granting disproportionate authority to certain regions, languages, and epistemic traditions [59]. Funding policies, collaborative networks, and international consortia further entrench these inequities, conferring material and symbolic advantages on institutions that already occupy dominant positions in the global knowledge landscape [60]. Language acts as another critical vector of inequality: the predominance of English as the global medium of scholarship privileges Anglophone institutions and researchers, while constraining the visibility, circulation, and perceived credibility of knowledge produced in other languages [61]. As a result, even high-quality research originating from historically marginalized regions may remain largely invisible or undervalued, reinforcing entrenched epistemic stratification and perpetuating the asymmetrical distribution of authority within the global academic system [62].

In this light, understanding knowledge as geographically and institutionally anchored reveals the deeply political and spatially situated nature of epistemic authority [63]. Knowledge is never simply a neutral or universal commodity; it is produced, legitimized, and mobilized through networks of spatial, institutional, and cultural relations that embed hierarchies and power differentials into the very processes of scholarship itself. By recognizing these dynamics, scholars can begin to map the uneven terrain of global knowledge, uncover the mechanisms that sustain asymmetries, and explore pathways toward more equitable, pluralistic, and contextually grounded epistemic practices. This unevenness creates absurd situations and may make the "center" of globalized science even more powerful at the expense of researchers from poorer, economically developing countries. Ersoy [64] provides examples of how scholars from countries such as Brazil and Turkey are compelled to take out loans or consider selling their homes to participate in the prestigious annual International Studies Association conferences. As the author suggests, there is an irresistible magnetic force that compels scientists and doctoral students to embark on these journeys, sometimes willingly incurring substantial financial burdens. These personal choices are intricately linked to the global institutional framework of science, which perpetuates asymmetric privileges in the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge.

ASYMMETRICAL EPISTEMIC ORDERS

The "geographies of knowledge" lens provides an overlooked perspective for understanding why epistemic hierarchies exist, persist, and are reproduced across time and space. One of the most visible and consequential manifestations of these dynamics is the asymmetrical global order of knowledge, where authority, recognition, and the circulation of ideas are profoundly uneven across regions, institutions, and languages [65-67]. Fricker's [68] concept of epistemic injustice sheds light on the ethical and social ramifications of these inequalities, illustrating how scholars and communities are systematically marginalized when their knowledge is undervalued, ignored, or dismissed. Researchers operating in the Global South, Africa, Eastern Europe, and post-socialist nations frequently encounter structural and symbolic barriers that limit their intellectual participation, restrict career advancement, and diminish the visibility of their work. These inequities are maintained not only through institutional dependency and material constraints but also through entrenched cultural hierarchies that elevate Northern epistemologies as the default and presumed universal standard [69]. The situation is further complicated by intersecting axes of exclusion: gender, race, and class disparities

amplify the challenges faced by already marginalized scholars, reinforcing entrenched patterns of underrepresentation within the global academic landscape [70].

Processes of evaluation and recognition, often framed as neutral or purely meritocratic, are central mechanisms through which these asymmetries are sustained. Scientometric indicators, journal impact factors and hierarchical rankings systematically confer authority on scholars situated in dominant centers [71], while scholars from peripheral regions are frequently compelled to adapt their research to meet externally imposed norms simply to be heard [72]. In practice, the geographic, cultural, or contextual specificity of research produced in the Global South or other marginalized regions is often treated as a liability, requiring justification or translation into the conceptual frameworks of dominant epistemologies [73]. Conversely, research originating in Northern institutions is frequently granted universal legitimacy without due introspection [74–75]. This formalized inequality underscores that epistemic asymmetries are neither accidental nor peripheral anomalies; rather, they are embedded in the structural, methodological, and symbolic practices that define the circulation and validation of knowledge on a global scale.

Yet these asymmetries are neither uncontested nor fixed. Across disciplines and regions, scholars and institutions are experimenting with strategies to challenge and transform the existing order. Inclusive evaluation frameworks that prioritize quality, originality, and ethical significance over conventional impact metrics are beginning to reshape scholarly recognition [76]. Collaborative research initiatives, grounded in regional epistemologies and developed with local communities, counter extractive paradigms and foster mutual accountability [77]. Multilingual and multimodal dissemination practices help overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, increasing the visibility of historically marginalized knowledge. Beyond structural measures, redistributing epistemic power requires sustained dialogue, critical reflexivity, and intellectual humility. Transformation entails not only questioning who speaks and who is heard, but also cultivating epistemic care, respect, and reciprocity, recognizing diverse knowledge systems as equally valid. In this sense, asymmetrical epistemic orders are both a product of entrenched hierarchies and a site of potential resistance, offering fertile ground for reimagining global knowledge as inclusive, dialogic, and attentive to the geographies in which it is produced [78].

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A CRITICAL NODE

Universities occupy a uniquely central position within the global knowledge ecosystem, serving simultaneously as nodes of epistemic stratification and as potential engines for transformative change [79]. As previously noted, they are not neutral spaces of inquiry; the very ideas used to structure these spaces are themselves contested [80]. Our conceptual frameworks actively shape what counts as knowledge, which voices are amplified, and whose insights circulate widely across disciplines and borders. By producing, validating, and disseminating knowledge, higher education institutions function as gatekeepers, determining which ideas gain traction and which are relegated to the margins, while also consolidating norms about how societal and research impact ought to be evaluated [81]. Decisions made within these institutions carry profound and often underappreciated implications for the configuration of global knowledge hierarchies, including research agendas, funding priorities, curriculum design [82], faculty recruitment, and publication or evaluation policies. Each choice, from grant allocation to journal selection for promotion or tenure, embeds assumptions about epistemic authority,

disciplinary legitimacy, and geographic relevance, creating cumulative effects that can either reinforce or challenge existing inequities.

The influence of universities extends beyond formal structures and policy mechanisms. Their spatial location, institutional history, and socio-cultural context shape how knowledge is produced, circulated, and interpreted. Research originating in well-resourced, historically dominant institutions tends to achieve wider recognition, more frequent citation, and greater mobility across international networks, whereas work from smaller or underfunded universities may struggle for visibility regardless of quality or rigor. Similarly, universities mediate knowledge circulation through relationships with funding agencies, professional associations, and global consortia, often reproducing systemic advantages for certain regions, disciplines, or epistemologies.

At the same time, universities hold the potential to act as agents of epistemic transformation. By critically reflecting on their own practices and engaging in deliberate, inclusive, and contextually grounded knowledge production, higher education institutions can disrupt entrenched hierarchies and foster alternative epistemic futures. Initiatives such as regionally oriented research collaborations, multilingual publishing, co-created and participatory methodologies, and equity-focused evaluation frameworks exemplify ways in which universities can cultivate more pluralistic and ethically informed knowledge ecosystems [83–84]. Transformative potential emerges not only from structural interventions but also from cultural shifts within the academy: cultivating reflexivity, humility, and openness to epistemic diversity allows scholars and administrators to question long-standing assumptions about universal standards, disciplinary dominance, and what constitutes "high-quality" knowledge [85].

Recognizing universities as critical nodes involves acknowledging their dual role as both sites of power and potential sites of resistance. They are at the same time instruments through which asymmetrical epistemic orders are maintained and platforms through which these orders can be contested, reshaped, and reimagined. Imagining alternative epistemic futures requires not merely including marginalized voices but fundamentally rethinking the relational, spatial, and institutional mechanisms through which knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated. Higher education, in this sense, is not merely a passive arena for knowledge but an active participant in shaping who is heard, what is valued, and how global knowledge hierarchies might evolve toward greater justice, plurality, and contextual sensitivity [but see 86].

TOWARDS A MORE EQUITABLE KNOWLEDGE ORDER

Addressing asymmetrical epistemic orders requires interventions that are both structural and relational, aimed at reshaping the very foundations through which knowledge is produced and evaluated. Structural changes involve rethinking institutional hierarchies, funding allocations, publication practices, and evaluation metrics that currently privilege dominant centers, languages, and epistemologies. It is not enough to simply invite more voices onto existing platforms; rather, the platforms themselves, along with the rules that govern recognition and legitimacy, must be transformed. Relational interventions, by contrast, emphasize sustained dialogue, collaboration, and mutual accountability among scholars from diverse regions and epistemic traditions. These interactions foster epistemic pluralism and encourage the development of frameworks that value originality, rigor, societal relevance, and contextual insight over mere geographic origin, institutional prestige, or adherence to standardized metrics [87].

Central to this endeavor is the integration of perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and other regions of the Global South into mainstream theoretical debates, university curricula, and the practical implementation of research. These contributions challenge dominant Northern epistemologies not by rejecting them outright, but by highlighting their assumptions, blind spots, and cultural biases. At the same time, Northern institutions must actively engage in reflexive practices, acknowledging their positional privilege and the ways in which their dominant standards have historically marginalized other epistemic communities. Redistributing resources, networks, and institutional influence to empower scholars from historically peripheral regions is essential for cultivating a knowledge ecosystem that is genuinely global, dialogic, and attentive to diverse lived experiences. Lastly, in addition to the necessity for universities and other academic institutions to adopt a more assertive approach towards Western/Northern-centric paradigms of scientific inquiry, scholarly subjects operating within various civilizational and linguistic frameworks should also strive for greater assertiveness in advancing and showcasing their intellectual contributions [72].

Global knowledge systems are not fixed or immutable; they are dynamic arenas shaped by ongoing negotiation, contestation, and co-creation. Asymmetrical epistemic orders reveal the profound entanglement of knowledge with geography, power, institutional authority, language, and historical legacies, yet they also illuminate pathways for transformation. By foregrounding the spatial, institutional, and ethical dimensions of knowledge, scholars and universities can challenge hierarchical structures and foster epistemic justice. Practices such as collaborative research grounded in local realities, multilingual publication strategies, and inclusive evaluation processes not only increase the visibility of marginalized knowledge but also expand the conceptual and methodological horizons of global scholarship.

Higher education institutions, as both nodes of authority and potential sites of innovation, are uniquely positioned to advance this transformative agenda. By embracing reflexivity, humility, and openness to epistemic diversity, universities can create spaces where knowledge is co-produced across boundaries, where ‘peripheral’ actors are recognized as legitimate co-creators rather than mere ‘local informants’ or data sources, and where evaluation criteria reflect context-sensitive rather than uniform global standards. By deconstructing Western epistemological models, which are abundant in biases, it becomes feasible to relativize them and change their role from an ultimate starting point to one of multiple cultural and epistemic structures [88]. A more equitable knowledge order thus emerges not as a top-down imposition or a tokenistic inclusion of marginalized voices but as an ongoing, dialogic, and collectively negotiated process that acknowledges the complex interplay of power, context, and expertise. In such an order, knowledge becomes not a tool of exclusion or hierarchy, but a shared, plural, and dynamic resource capable of addressing the diverse and pressing challenges of our interconnected world [89–90].

The geographical approach to the structuring of knowledge within the global system can introduce a heightened sensitivity to various regional and national schools of higher education and knowledge production [75]. However, it also conceals a real risk of reinforcing the dominance of traditional hegemons and Anglo-American theories, publication practices, and institutions. Al-Hardan & Go [91, p. 35] also note that it is generally accepted that dominant social theory originates from the “West”. Thus, the solution to the issue of diversifying scientific output lies in identifying “non-Western” ideas by localizing, for example, “local”, “Asian”, “African”, or “Southern” thinkers who are in search of intellectual spaces “beyond” the “West” and the “Global North”. This

indicates that if a scholar resides in or comes from a “non-Western” or “non-European” location, their ideas should be valued solely because of that geographical origin.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge is inherently situated, emerging within specific social, institutional, and spatial contexts that shape what is recognized and valued in the global knowledge system. The concept of geographies of knowledge highlights that knowledge is never placeless or neutral, but always produced, validated, and extended through particular places, institutions, networks, and infrastructures. Asymmetrical epistemic orders exemplify how authority, recognition, and circulation are unevenly distributed across regions, languages, and institutions, reflecting historical legacies, institutional practices, and contemporary power hierarchies.

Addressing these asymmetries requires structural and relational interventions: fostering dialogue among diverse scholars, adopting pluralistic evaluation criteria, integrating perspectives from historically marginalized regions, and redistributing institutional influence and resources. Higher education institutions play a central role in shaping these spatial hierarchies, mediating which knowledge is amplified and which perspectives are marginalized. By attending to the spatial, institutional, and ethical dimensions of knowledge, universities can move beyond reproducing asymmetrical orders toward cultivating a more inclusive, contextually grounded, and dialogic global knowledge system.

A geo-epistemically informed perspective underscores that knowledge is relational, spatially embedded, and politically charged. Transforming global knowledge systems demands reflexivity, sustained dialogue, and attention to the material and institutional conditions that produce inequities. Through this lens, knowledge becomes a shared, situated, and dynamic endeavor, capable of reflecting the diverse realities of a globalized world.

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