

## EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND THE KNOWLEDGE EXPERIENCE: A DEWEYAN ACCOUNT

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**ABSTRACT:** In the current literature on alternative epistemologies, one can question two problematic assumptions: firstly, oppressed groups generally have at disposal the knowledge that is needed for their practices of social critique; and secondly, the epistemic problems they need to confront are not properly cognitive, they concern rather the task of making sense of their own problematic experience. Now, for many struggles, the epistemic challenge is to produce better knowledge about the nature and causes of problematic situations as well as the means to resolve them. In this paper, I argue that a Deweyan account of knowledge can contribute to a better understanding of this challenge. Firstly, I explore Dewey's approach to the "knowledge experience" and analyze the various roles it can play in social critique. Secondly, I argue that oppressed groups sometimes need better knowledge than what they already have, and this requires specific type of epistemic empowerment.

**Keywords:** Alternative epistemologies, John Dewey, social critique, knowledge experience, epistemic empowerment.

Feminist theories and critical race studies, as well as other strands of what can be termed "alternative epistemologies" (for instance postcolonial and decolonial theories), have provided groundbreaking insights on the cognitive conditions and effects of domination and injustice, as well as on the cognitive conditions and effects of the struggles against structural domination and injustice. In the methodological framework of a social epistemology, M. Fricker (2007) and J. Medina (2013), among others, have tried to systematize the epistemological implications, as well as the implication for the theory of justice and democracy of these epistemologies. The motivation of these theoretical projects is clearly to politicize epistemology from the point of view of social critique. But social critique as such has not yet been subjected to a systematic scrutiny. What are the cognitive activities at play in social critique and what are their specific epistemic functions? The purpose of this article is to address these issues from a Deweyan perspective.

Since Dewey has indeed not intended to elaborate an epistemology of social critique, a preliminary clarification is required about what I mean here by Deweyan perspec-

ive. I assume that this perspective is specified by its processual orientation, its analysis of epistemological issues in terms of activities, its instrumentalism, and its focus on issues related to the experience of knowledge. The first assumption is not controversial at all since Dewey, as well as Pierce, is usually considered as a process philosopher (Debrock, 2003). According to his account of "social reform" in the *Lectures in China*, for instance, social critique is motivated by experiences of injustices or domination, and the dynamics of social criticism that derive from them must be analyzed in sequential terms (Dewey, 1973, 72-81). One trademark of the Deweyan approach to social movements is probably to highlight that social movements provide illustration of the "creativity of action" (Joas, 1996) and of the "practical and cognitive productivity" of problematic social experience (Renault, 2018). Such creativity or productivity is clearly processual. The second assumption is not more controversial. The fact that Dewey's epistemology focuses on what is now termed "cognitive activities", and hence anticipates some versions of the contemporary "practice turn" in epistemology (Chang, 2014), is hardly disputable. Dewey defines "thought" as inquiry, and he conceives of logical theory as an analysis of the various activities involved in the process leading from a problematic situation to a warranted assertion. Another distinctive characteristic of his epistemology is indeed its instrumentalism. All this has implication for his account of social critique for the concept of "public", in the *Public and its Problems*, and the concept of "social inquiry", in *Logic. A Theory of Inquiry*, provide processual accounts of the series of cognitive activities involved social critique conceived as an instrument for solving social problems. The last assumption refers to another distinctive trait of Dewey's epistemology that has been less often analyzed (Renault, 2015): it concerns the theory of the "knowledge experience". Instead of conceiving knowledge simply as the activity of pooling information (as in cognitive sciences and some strands of social epistemology<sup>1</sup>), or as the

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<sup>1</sup> "Our concept of knowledge is captured in the concept of the good informant, because (as the State of Nature story shows) essentially what it is to be a knower is to participate in the shar-

distinctive propriety of representations or beliefs that are true and justified (as in contemporary analytical epistemology and in some strands of feminist epistemology<sup>2</sup>), Dewey analyses knowledge as a particular type of experience produced by a doubt that results in a process termed inquiry. In other words, he gives an experiential and processual meaning to the concept of knowledge.

Such a Deweyan epistemology of social critique can overcome two of the main shortcomings of the contemporary approaches to social critique. Contemporary political philosophy implicitly reduces the cognitive activities at play in social critique either to descriptive activities (when social critique is thought of as “disclosing critique”) (Honneth, 2000 ; Kompridis, 2006) , or to interpretative activities (when social critique is conceived of as “hermeneutic critique” or “reconstructive critique”) (Walzer, 1993; Honneth, 2018), or to justificatory activities (in constructivist and deliberative model of social critique) (Forst, 2011). Dewey’s philosophy provides a corrective since the very idea of inquiry encompass and interconnects a wider range of cognitive activities. Since I have dealt with this issue elsewhere (Renault, 2021), I will focus on a second shortcoming that relates to a too restricted view of the epistemic problems that can be met in the process of social critique, and of the epistemic functions of the cognitive activities that are intended to find solution to these problems. In alternative epistemologies, there is a tendency to consider that oppressed groups shouldn’t consider their knowledge as problematic, although it is socially disqualified. As a result, the need to produce a better knowledge is not seriously taken into account in their accounts of the process of social critique. These epistemologies focus mainly on the attempts made by the oppressed in order to find appropriate ways of making sense of what is wrong in the problematic experience they are enduring, as well as on their attempts to

struggle against the delegitimization of their knowledge and claims. To find solution to these problems, what would be at stake for the oppressed would not be to produce better knowledge but to struggle against the delegitimization of their own knowledge, as well as to produce models of interpretation of the specific wrongs of their problematic experience, and new models of articulation and justification of their claim (Medina, 2013; Serrano Zamora, 2019). Indeed, the significance of these problems and of the attempts to overcome them is not disputable, but it is simply a fact that in many social movements, the knowledge available is experienced as a problem, and that attempts are made in order to produce less problematic knowledge. In other words, the “knowledge experience” sometimes plays a crucial role in the practices of social critique.

To put it provocatively, from a Deweyan point of view, it seems that in their account of social critique, alternative epistemologies haven’t taken seriously enough the epistemological problem *par excellence*, namely the problem of knowledge. In order to suggest that there is a distinctive Deweyan way of taking it seriously, I will first describe Dewey’s approach to the knowledge experience and analyze the various roles it can play in social critique. In a second step, I will criticize the assumptions that lead alternative epistemologies and contemporary epistemologies inspired by them to understate the significance of this experience.

### Knowledge experience and epistemic empowerment

According to Dewey, the notion of knowledge denotes in the first place a specific experience: the experience of a doubt produced by a problematic situation that results in an inquiry about the nature of the problematic situation, about its causes and the best means at disposal to solve the problem. When the inquiry is successful, that is when the best solution is put in practice in such a way that our experience ceases to be problematic, the doubt is settled and something is known. The knowledge experience has come to its end.

ing of information” (Fricker, 2007, p. 145). The concept of “State of Nature” refers here to Craig (1990).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Haslanger (1999) who analyses the implication of feminist epistemology for this type of definition of truth and who suggest that this discussion concerns more broadly the implication of other alternative epistemologies.

This theory of the knowledge experience is elaborated in the *Studies in Logical Theory* and deepened in a series of articles published in the years 1905-1906<sup>3</sup>, where Dewey distinguishes three types of experiences: the non-cognitive experience, the cognitive experience, and the cognitional experience. In most of our ordinary interactions with the environment, our experience remains pre-cognitive. Interactions are regulated by habits, that is by embodied know-hows that operate at the level of tacit knowledge, beyond the threshold of conscious experience. When our habits are no longer able to regulate these interactions, that is when experience becomes problematic, it crosses this threshold: sensations emerge in our field of consciousness that indicate that a problem must be solved. Experience becomes “cognitive” because a difficulty occurs that can no longer be solved by our tacit knowledge, but only by a conscious scrutiny of the problem. The solution can be found directly: a simple attention to the problem is often enough to understand the nature of the practical obstacle indicated by a sensation, and to find a solution. No inquiry into the nature of the problematic situation, the causes of the problem and the means at disposal is then required. The experience has become “cognitive” without having also become “cognitional”. In other cases, attention to the problematic situation results in a doubt that cannot be settled but by such an inquiry. The “cognitive” experience becomes “cognitional”; it takes the form of a “knowledge experience”.

A clarifying illustration of such a transformation of the non-cognitive experience into a cognitive experience that does not result in a cognitional experience is provided in chapter four of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Analyzing the experience of writing with a pencil, Dewey points out that it usually doesn't cross the threshold of conscious experience: “The person who is taking notes

has no sensations of the pressure of his pencil on the paper or on his hand as long as it functions properly [...]. If the pencil-point gets broken or too blunt and the habit of writing does not operate smoothly, there is a conscious shock: the felling of something the matter, something gone wrong. The emotional change operates as a stimulus to a needed change in operation” (MW 12: 130-131). Then, the solution is immediately found; no inquiry is required: “One looks at his pencil, sharpens it or take another pencil from his pocket” (MW 12: 131). The experience has become cognitive, but the cognitive experience hasn't led to a knowledge experience and it soon takes again its non-cognitive form.

Indeed, other cognitive experiences lead to inquiries, that is to cognitional experiences, or knowledge experiences, and therefore it is tempting to think of the main elements of the cognitive experiences, namely sensations, as the true elements and the true basis of knowledge, as in the sensualist school. But such a conception is wrong because sensation and knowledge belong to two different phases: “Sensations are no parts of *any* knowledge, good or bad, superior or inferior, imperfect or complete. They are rather provocations, incitements, challenges to an act of inquiry with is to terminate in knowledge. They [...] are no way of knowing at all. [...] Sensation is thus, as the sensationalist claimed, the beginning of knowledge, but only in the sense that the experienced shock of change is the necessary stimulus to the investigation and comparing which eventually produce knowledge” (MW 12: 131).

Dewey's approach of knowledge is both experiential, processual, instrumental and fallibilist. It is experiential since it claims that the notion of knowledge should be used only to denote the situation when knowledge becomes a problem to solve, that is, when we experience that we do not know what is going on so that we must become inquirers in order to produce the knowledge of what is going on. It notably means that it is as just illegitimate to speak of “knowledge” at the pre-cognitive level (for instance when one speaks of “tacit knowledge” or of

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<sup>3</sup> “The Experimental Theory of Knowledge” (MW 3: 107-127), “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” (MW 3: 158-167), “Immediate Empiricism” (MW 3: 168-170), “The Knowledge Experience and its Relationships” (MW 3: 171-177), “The Knowledge Experience Again” (MW 3: 178-183). For an analysis of these articles and of their contribution to Dewey's theory of the knowledge experience, see Renault (2015).

“know-how”<sup>4</sup>), as to speak of the components of the cognitive but not cognitional experience (for instance sensations) as sensuous knowledge. Dewey’s conception of knowledge is also processual since the very notion of knowledge doesn’t denote anything more than the process of inquiry, or the experience of *knowing*, and its possible successful result, namely the experience that something is *known* (or “cognized”). Hence, the criticism of the traditional conception of knowledge as a representation, or a belief, or a proposition, having its truth in itself, independently of the inquiries that have produced the belief in their truth. As Dewey point out in *Logic. A Theory of Inquiry*: “That which satisfactorily terminates inquiry is, by definition, knowledge; it is knowledge because it is the appropriate close of inquiry”. The opposite view is wrong, according to which knowledge is “supposed to have a meaning of its own apart from connection with and reference to inquiry” (LW 12: 15-16). Dewey’s conception of knowledge is also instrumental since what counts at knowledge, when the process of knowing “satisfactorily terminates”, is a means for practical solution to a problematic situation. Finally, the notion of knowledge doesn’t denote any permanent value of some beliefs, but only the fact that particular beliefs have been successfully fixed in particular inquiry processes. Now, further problematic experiences and further inquiries can cast doubts of these beliefs, depriving them of the distinctive characteristic of knowledge in its Deweyan sense, namely the fact that they have settled a doubt.

Such a Deweyan conception of knowledge has a two-fold interest for an epistemology of social critique. The

first one is that it provides a convincing argument to support the claim that the concept of knowledge can denote something else than the claim to epistemic authority that is associate with sentences such as “I know”, or than the power relations that create a hierarchy between the epistemic value of the body of the beliefs of the privileged groups (beliefs socially recognized as knowledge) by contrast with the beliefs to the oppressed groups. It is simply a fact that the social relations of domination result in inequalities in the distribution of epistemic authority and epistemic value, or in “epistemic injustice”. It is hardly disputable that such inequalities must be subjected to social critique, and that what is at stake for the oppressed groups is notably to be recognized, inside as well as outside of group, as knowers having epistemic authority and whose beliefs are knowledges. These dimensions of the epistemology of social critique can notably be articulated by Foucault’s concepts of “power-knowledge” and of “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” as for instance in Mc Worther’s analysis of racism and sexual oppression (2009). But practices of social criticism are confronted to other types of epistemic problems, such as the “cognitional” problems that lead to “knowledge experiences”.

The second interest of Dewey’s epistemology is precisely that it offers appropriate means to analyze the effects produced by these cognitional problems on the practices of social criticism, as well as to study the role that the cognitive activities intended to solve these problems can play in such practices. This epistemology makes it possible to draw attention to various types of experiences where knowledge becomes a problem to solve within the process of social critique. It is noteworthy that three types of cognitional problems can make obstacle to the cognitive dynamics that can lead from problematic social experience to articulation of social critique. I will now distinguish them and provide illustrations with reference to the cognitional difficulties that had to be overcome before that the criticism of suffering at work had become a workable form of social critique (Renault, 2017a; 2020a). Firstly, the problematic experi-

<sup>4</sup> The chapter 7 of *Logic. A theory of inquiry* contends that there is no other knowledge than propositional knowledge, and in *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey points out that the practical skills embodied in habits shouldn’t be denoted as “know-hows” because they are not knowledge at all: “We may, indeed, be said to know how by means of our habits. And a sensible intimation of the practical function of knowledge has led men to identify all acquired practical skill, or even the instinct of animals, with knowledge. We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them. [...] But after all, this practical work done by habit and instinct in securing prompt and exact adjustment to the environment is not knowledge, except by courtesy” (MW 14: 124).

ence can appear too particular and not universal enough, or not significant enough, to belong to the realm of social critique. For instance, suffering at work had to be proved widespread enough, and serious enough, to become a subject matter of social critique. Secondly, the nature of the causes of the problematic situation can be so unclear that it is impossible to decide whether this problematic situation has social causes that could be transformed. Now, the social critique of a problematic situation loses its function if it is not grounded on a belief in the possibility of a transformation of the causes of this problematic situation. For instance, suffering at work cannot become a subject matter of social critique as long as it seems that its causes are psychological rather than social, or that this suffering is a side-effect of the best economical organization, its social causes having thus some kind of necessity. Thirdly, even if the doubt concerning such transformation is settled, the social critique of this situation will also lose its function if it remains doubtful that some means at disposal are able to modify the social factors of the problematic situation in such a way that it could become less problematic and more satisfactory. For instance, the critique of suffering at work will seem pointless if the levers for the transformation of the work conditions are lacking, so that the only option is adaptation to this suffering.

The first cognitional problem concerns the nature of the problematic situation, the second its causes, and the third the means at disposal. They correspond to each of the three types of problematic situations that can lead to an inquiry according to chapter devoted to "The Analysis of a Complete Act of Thought" in *How we think?* (MW 6: 234-236). Each of these problems can lead to specific inquiries, which can be successful or not. Now, they need to be somehow successful for a problematic social experience to result in social critique. An indeed, individuals and groups experiencing problematic social experiences and confronted to these cognitional problems are not necessarily able to find appropriate solution. In other words, the cognitional problems can become cognitional obstacle to social critique. Such cognitional obstacles play

a crucial role in *The Public and its Problems* when Dewey analyses the "eclipse of the public" (Gautier, 2015). He points out that a public necessarily remains inchoative if it is constituted only by the collection of those who experience a social situation as problematic. He underlines that a public has to identify the nature and causes of the problem it experiences in order to "identify itself". Now, the structure of the "great society" makes it difficult to get a knowledge of the generality of the problems experienced and of their causes: in such a society, there is no direct experience of the causes of the structural problems and no direct communication between all those who are affected by these problems. Unable to elaborate by themselves fruitful inquiries about the nature and the causes of the problematic situation they experience, the individuals and groups concerned are not able to unite into a "public", that is into a collective subject of social critique. In the context of the great society, the only solution would be provided by the social sciences, just as critical psychology and sociology of work has helped workers to become aware of the widespread nature of suffering at work, of its seriousness, and of the possibility of a transformation of its social factors. This is the reason why Dewey also explains that the disorientation of the contemporary publics is due to a lack of development and popularization of the social sciences. He doesn't suggest indeed that oppressed groups always depend on social sciences for their emancipation. He only takes seriously the empirical evidence that individuals and groups are not always skilled enough to find by themselves solutions to the cognitional problems they are confronted to in their practical and cognitive efforts to make the world better. When they are not cognitively skilled enough, social sciences can provide useful intellectual tools. The purpose of Dewey's social philosophy is precisely to supplement social sciences in the production of such intellectual tools (Renault, 2017b).

These arguments elaborated in *The Public and its Problems* imply notably that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of knowledge experience: in the first one, the cognitional problem can be solved because in-

quirers have the required cognitive tools at their disposal; in the second case, what is required is the appropriation of new cognitive tools: the process of knowing becomes a process of epistemic empowerment.

### Do oppressed groups need better knowledge?

Dewey's terminology is too idiosyncratic to be of immediate use in social epistemological contemporary debates. In these debates, the notion of knowledge often denotes the beliefs that are available in order to describe, analyze and explain internal and external phenomena. It is in this sense that different types of bodies of knowledge can be attributed to various social groups, and that hierarchies of epistemic value can be described that are rooted in social relations of domination between these groups. As already noted, it is in this sense that Foucault coined the term "power-knowledge" that relates to the concept of knowledge in the descriptive sense of bodies of beliefs having social validity rather than in the normative sense of body of true and justified knowledges<sup>5</sup>. Since these sets of beliefs can operate at the precognitive level (as embodied in habits), or at the cognitive level (when it suffices to focus on a problem to find a solution), Dewey would refuse to denote them by the term "knowledge", even if most of them result from a fixation of belief that occurred at the cognitive level in past inquiries. But Dewey's point is a substantial and not simply terminological, and since he himself pointed out that "no one has the right to issue an ukase" about the legitimate use of the term "knowledge" (MW 14: 124), it makes sense to try and articulate his substantial point in the less idiosyncratic terminology that enables to speak of the bodies of beliefs having social validity as "knowledge". In this less idiosyncratic terminology, Dewey's point can be stated as follows: the knowledge experi-

ence is an experience of the need for better knowledge of the nature and causes of a problematic situation, and of the means available for transforming this situation into a more satisfactory one. I have already mentioned that Dewey seemed to consider that the knowledge experience plays a decisive role in some practices of social critique, and with the example of the controversies concerning suffering at work, I provided contemporary illustration of this role. But in contemporary social epistemological discussions about epistemic injustice and epistemic resistance, such an experience is usually not considered. Is it because it never plays a role in the practices of social critique of the oppressed (Dewey would be wrong or this point)? Or is the knowledge experience rather a blind spot of these discussions (and Dewey would help shedding light on it)?

Contemporary alternative epistemologies, as well as social epistemologies drawing on them, seem to share the two following assumptions: firstly, oppressed groups always have at disposal the knowledge that is needed for their practices of social critique; secondly, the epistemic problems they are confronted with are not of a cognitive type but rather relate to the necessity of finding better ways of "making sense" of their negative social experience, and of struggling against the lack of legitimacy of their knowledge and claims. The Deweyan epistemology of social critique that have been sketched in the previous section suggests that there might be something problematic in these two assumptions. In order to decide whether it is the case or not, a critical examination of both of these assumptions is required.

The first one has both empirical and critical justification. The empirical reason why it seems legitimate to consider that oppressed groups don't experience the need for a better knowledge in their practices of social critique is that it seems that they have a better knowledge of the domination and injustice they experience than any other social group. The superiority of this knowledge results from the fact that their past experiences of domination and injustice have led them to enquiries that have produced a stock of knowledge of

<sup>5</sup> These clarifications are required notably because in English, the notion of knowledge is more ambiguous than in French and other Latin languages, where a distinction is made between "knowledge" as "savoir" (or as set of beliefs having social validity) and "connaissance" (that corresponds to knowledge in the normative sense). Foucault speaks of "savoir-pouvoir" and not of "connaissance-pouvoir"

the specificities of the domination and injustice they suffer. What is at stake is to become confident in this knowledge, and to share it among the group and the participants in practices of social critique, rather than to produce better knowledge. Conversely, those who are benefiting from injustice and domination, and whose knowledge is socially recognized as more legitimate, are actually suffering from a type of ignorance resulting from a belief in the universality of their condition and a denial of the damaging consequences of their privileges; hence the “white ignorance”, as well as some kind of “ruling class ignorance” and “masculine ignorance” (Mills, 1997; Sullivan, 2006; Bernasconi, 2007; Medina, 2013, 103-109). Therefore, what is at stake is to help the oppressed becoming aware that their socially delegitimized knowledge is a better knowledge than the legitimate knowledge of the privileged group, as in Foucault’s project of an “insurrection of the subjugated knowledge”. Hence the critical justification of the refusal to focus on the cognitive limitation of the oppressed. To highlight this point would run the risk to giving confirmation to the prejudice that their knowledge is suffering from epistemological deficits by comparison with more legitimate bodies of knowledge. Hence Medina’s critique of Fricker’s conception of epistemic injustices as undermining the cognitive capacities of the oppressed. Drawing on Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness”, he claims that: “the subjects who become most epistemically harmed and hermeneutically disadvantaged in their ability to make sense of their social experiences of racialization were in fact those who benefit the most from hermeneutical obstacles” (2013, 104). Hence, the critical task is to highlight the epistemological deficits of the legitimate bodies of knowledge and to highlight the specific legitimacy of the knowledge of the oppressed. As noted by Santos (2008, L; 2016, 196), in order to work toward these goals, a pragmatist contextualist argument can be used: the validity of knowledge is always dependent on the context where it help finding solutions to problematic experiences, and it is mere ideological illusion when the ruling class, or other socially privileged groups, claim

that their knowledge apply to type of the social experiences that organize the life of the oppressed groups.

There is nothing problematic with these arguments, but there are not enough to conclude that the oppressed cannot experience the need for a better knowledge in their practices of social critique, or that the knowledge experience can play a too crucial role in these practices to be simply ignored. The knowledge experience, as conceived of by Dewey, is a very common and ordinary experience. Any members of any social groups often experience that the knowledge available is not enough to solve the problems she is confronted to. Hence the use of sources of supplementary information: books, maps, internet search, discussions with others, etc. It goes without saying that such experiences are also prevalent among oppressed groups, and it is hardly disputable that in the social practices associated with social critique – practices that are less structured by social regularities and therefore less regulated by habits than other social practices – such experience will be all the more demanding.

It is probably true that in some cases, the knowledge of the oppressed is enough to cope with the daily experience of injustice and domination, as well as with the other practical problems that structure their ordinary social experience, including their ordinary practices of social critique of injustice and domination. There is no doubt that in some ordinary practices of social critique, such as the practices denotes by the concept of “hidden transcript” coined by Scott (1990), the oppressed are confronted to cognitional problems they are perfectly able to solve. When these cognitional problems occur, the knowledge experience only implies readjustment, instead of deep transformations of the knowledge already available. The process of knowing that is then going on is not accompanied by the feeling that the knowledge available is not enough. This knowledge experience implies no objection, but rather a confirmation of the assumption according to which oppressed groups possess the knowledge that is needed for their practices of social critique.

But there is no reason to think that the knowledge available is always enough when the practice of social critique are less routinized and when what is at stake is to find the best means to struggle against injustice and domination, or when political adversaries argue that it is wrong to claim that a social problem is caused by a set of non-necessary social factors, so that a social transformation is possible that would lead to a more satisfactory situation rather to worsen difficulties. On the contrary, the history of the development of the worker movement or of feminism provides numerous examples where overcoming cognitional obstacle is experienced as a challenge hard to tackle. Hence the need for theory and critical social science that has been a distinctive feature of the historical development of these two movements. Another illustration of such cognitional challenges is provided by the fact that social movements often call critical social sciences for help, in order to produce counter-expertise and make their claim more legitimate in deliberative arena where legitimate knowledge is used as a weapon against them. In these various cases, the cognitional problems cannot be solved solely by the body of knowledge already at disposal in the oppressed group. What is required is a contextual and instrumental appropriation of other types of cognitive tools in order to adjust the cognitive skills to the cognitional problem to be solved. The experience of knowledge is not only that of an adaptation of the body of knowledge already at disposal to the problematic situation, but that of an epistemic empowerment.

It is also the case that some oppressed groups, such as the those who suffer from great poverty in situation of social marginalization, do not always have at their disposal the body of knowledges that enable them to cope efficiently with the arduousness of their daily social life. They have indeed a knowledge of the situations of extreme poverty, and the epistemic value of their knowledge is generally not recognized as it should, while it is often more relevant than the administrative knowledge that is used by social workers and institutions to rule their lives. It remains that the members of these groups also experience their own incapacity to find long term

solutions to the social problems they are stuck in, as well as their incapacity to find satisfactorily solutions to their conflictual interactions with social workers and institutions. They sometime experience these incapacities as lack of knowledge of the causes of their problems and of the means to make things better. The knowledge experience then takes the form of a need for knowledge, and they are often convinced that they can't satisfy this need by themselves because of their poor educational background and long-term exposition to denial of recognition of their capacities as knowers. When not repressed, this need takes then the form of a need for epistemic empowerment, namely, for some kind of contextual and instrumental appropriation, that is also translation (Santos, 2014: 212-235), of empirical information and theoretical tools that could provide answer to the question that emerge from their problematic social experience but that they fail to answer by themselves. These points have been made notably in the book published by the Fourth World-University Research Group (2007): *The Merging of Knowledge*.

These remarks suffice to cast doubt on the second assumption: the types of epistemic problems to which the oppressed are confronted relate mainly to the necessity of finding better ways of "making sense" of their negative social experience, and of struggling against the lack of legitimacy of their knowledge and of their claims. These two types of problems correspond to what M. Fricker termed "hermeneutical injustice" and "testimonial injustices". Interestingly, J. Medina has criticized her concept of "testimonial injustice" for reducing the issue of the lack of credibility of "producers of knowledge", or inquirers, to that of "givers of knowledge", or "informants":

According to Fricker, a speaker is epistemically objectified when she is undermined in "her capacity as *givers* of knowledge" (p. 133; my emphasis). But a speaker can also be undermined in her capacity as *producer* of knowledge, that is, not as informant who report to an inquirer, but as an *inquirer* herself, as an investigating subject who asks questions and issues interpretations and evaluations of knowledge and opinions. Assuming that all silencing and all objectifying will be avoided when speakers are treated by in-

formants is wrong, for their voices can still be constrained and minimized and their capacities as knowers can still be undermined. The epistemic agency of an informant qua informant is limited and subordinated to that of the inquirers (Medina, 2013, 92).

While Fricker is claiming that “the core of the concept of knowledge” is the “co-operative practice of pooling knowledge” (2006, 154), Medina points out that knowledge should rather be defined in Deweyan terms, as inquiry. He convincingly adds that the lack of credibility from which the member of oppressed groups suffer should be considered as an epistemic injustice because it delegitimizes and undermines not so much their capacity as providers of information than rather their capacity as inquirers. But the definition of inquiry he assumes puts again the knowledge experience into bracket. When he defines inquiry as a process in which one “asks questions and issues interpretations and evaluations of knowledge and opinions”, the cognitional problems concerning the nature and causes of the problematic situation, and the best practical means at disposal, are far from coming to the fore. It could indeed be argued that when J. Medina highlights the role of the “struggles to make sense” (2013, 92) in the epistemic resistances of the oppressed, he refers to inquiries that consist precisely in attempts to produce better knowledge of the situation. As a matter of fact, the idea of “making sense” is loose enough to be specified in various sense. In the context of the epistemic resistances of the oppressed, to “struggle to make sense” can mean either trying to issue better interpretation of what is wrong in problematic social experiences, or trying to articulate better description of what is wrong in these experience, or trying to elaborate better analysis and explanation of these experiences. In contemporary alternative epistemologies and social epistemologies, the first two meaning come to the fore.

Fricker’s “hermeneutical injustice” concern the fact that oppressed groups can experience difficulties in making sense of the injustice and domination they suffer, and that these difficulties can hinder their capacity to subject domination and injustice to social critique. She also points

out that these groups can successfully struggle to make sense of their problematic social experience, as shown by the collective elaboration of the notion of “sexual harassment” within feminist groups (2006, 147-152). This example is telling because it makes a big difference, from a normative point of view, and the related possibilities of social critique, to denote an interaction as a form of flirting or as a “sexual harassment”. But in this case, the new category only provides an answer to the question: how the problematic dimensions of this interaction should be denoted in order to appear as incompatible with shared normative expectations. The problem is neither to find the best way to describe these problematic dimensions, nor to settle a doubt concerning the nature of this interaction or its causes. The problem is simply to find the best ways to denounce the interaction, given that the very notion of “flirt” is somehow legitimizing it. In other words, the function of the interpretation is normative and not cognitional. Here, making sense doesn’t mean producing better knowledge but better normative evaluation.

In other cases, indeed, making sense means producing better descriptions of the problematic dimension of a social situation. What is at stake is then to elaborate accurate description of some problematic dimensions of the social experience that remain socially invisible or that seem difficult to capture in the framework of the bodies of knowledge at disposal. Hence the use of novels, and other means of expression, in order to produce “self-description” of the experience of the oppressed, as highlighted by P. Hill Collins (1999: 97-122). Hence also the elaboration of concepts such as “class domination” “patriarchy” or “white supremacy” that are intended to provide a better description of the problematic situations experience by the working class, by women and by racialized people, as noted notably by C. Mills (2005). When the oppressed struggle to make sense in these ways, that is in searching for better descriptions of the problematic dimensions of their social experience, they are not mainly motivated by a doubt concerning the nature of the situation or by a will to produce a better knowledge of the nature of the situation. They are rather

motivated by the will to share their experience and to find appropriate ways to articulate what is at stake in these experiences, so that they could be subjected to social critique.

But in other cases, the struggles to make sense are indeed consisting in attempts to produce better knowledge of the nature and the cause of the problematic situation. When the worker movement elaborated the concept of exploitation, what was at stake was not only to produce a better description of what was going wrong in the capitalist wage system. The concept of exploitation was also intended to disclose the structural causes of the dominations and injustices suffered by the proletariat, and to orient its political struggles toward the relevant targets. The elaboration of the concept of exploitation was the result of a desperate struggle of the emerging proletariat to make sense of the new working conditions, with the help of some Saint-Simonian intellectuals. It provided a better knowledge of the nature and the causes of the working-class condition, it helped analyze more precisely the nature of the problem, the social transformation required, and it led to renewed reflection about the means at disposal in order to struggle against the social domination and injustices suffered by the proletariat (Bourdeau, 2018). It participated in a process of epistemic emancipation that played a decisive role in the history of social critique.

I have tried to show that the production of knowledge is one the main forms of the epistemic empowerment that can be achieved when the oppressed try to make sense of the dominations and injustices they suffer. Such epistemic empowerment shouldn't be reduced to their attempts at elaborating new (self-)descriptions and at issuing new normative interpretations. It also concern the production of better knowledge of the nature and causes of the problematic situations, as well as of the means at disposal to

make the world better. According to P. Hill Collins, one of the tasks of alternative epistemologies is "to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice" (1999, 269). I have tried to suggest that Dewey's theory of the knowledge experience offers interesting tools to work toward this goal. It offers a means for focusing on the specificities of the cognitional problems that can be met in ordinary interactions and in practices of social critique, as well as on the activities intended to solve these problems. It offers a means for investigating into some epistemological dimensions of the practice of social critique that other epistemological paradigms fail to analyze convincingly. Dewey's methodological framework provides a useful corrective for the lack of reflection<sup>6</sup>, in contemporary political philosophy and social epistemology, on the need for knowledge that is associated with social critique (a need that expresses itself notably in the pathological form of conspiracy theories) as well as on the critical effects of knowledge.

There is indeed a temptation to get rid of the very concept of knowledge because the claim to know and the social recognition of a belief as a knowledge are always embedded in social relations of domination. But to get rid of the notion of knowledge, or to reduce it to its descriptive sense, would be politically dangerous. Just as the notion of objectivity, the normative sense of the notion of knowledge expresses the political necessity "to think about the gap should exist between how any individual or group wants the world be and how in fact it" (Harding, 1992, 461). What is required is then to complement the notion of knowledge as power-knowledge with an another notion of knowledge that could capture the critical and emancipatory effects of some knowing processes. Dewey's conception of the knowledge experience can help working toward this goal.

<sup>6</sup> I criticized this lack elsewhere (Renault, 2020b)

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