

Call for Papers
Knowledge and Power:
Epistemic Conflicts in Democracy
Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference at the University of Essex
29-30th July 2021



Keynotes:

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Despite promising an ideal of equality, liberal democracies often display elements of epistocracy. Governments appoint academic advisers, launch expert councils and committees, and hire consulting firms to decide key public policies. These practices embed political decisions with epistemic legitimacy – who, if not experts, know how to collect and interpret data, and prescribe effective solutions? Examples of this dynamic can be found both in government sponsorship of academics to write key social-policy reports (Stasi Commission 2003, Bouchard-Taylor Report 2008) and the strategic branding of economic policy as the domain of erudite “experts” to restrict public participation (Ascher 2016; Stasiulis 2013). Authors such as Jason Brennan (2016) even go so far as to propose curbing citizens’ voting rights based on their epistemic virtues.

Further, it seems science has become politicised to a degree that any statement runs the risk of being relativised as interest-bound such that scientific insight no longer grants epistemic legitimacy to political decisions. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the Trump administration have demonstrated that political actors do not always value expert opinion; and/or they mobilise counter-expertise that supports their agenda. Instead, their actions resonate with the emerging literature on agnotology (e.g., Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008) and ignorance studies (e.g., Gross and McGoey 2015), which claims that “ignorance should not be viewed as a simple omission or gap, but rather as an active production” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, p. 9). While there are things we simply do not know, the inclusion of interests and power relations in the analysis of (non-)knowledge shows how certain things are actively rendered to be unknown or uncertain.

Normative democratic theory tends to abstract epistemic conflicts away. Some theorists (e.g., Rawls 1993; Quong 2011) consider ideal politics only to take place between sufficiently and (roughly) equally rational and reasonable political actors. Important criticisms of such idealized conditions of deliberative democracy have been developed in works of critical political theory that expose relations

of power in the construction of knowledge-producing discourses (Foucault 1980; Young 2000; Mouffe 2005). In epistemology, a rich strand of literature on disagreement has evolved that also informs political philosophy (e.g., Peter 2016). But even here, authors tend to construct an idealised stand-off in which only competent persons of equal knowledge and abilities (“epistemic peers”) face off (e.g., Boggardus 2009; Christensen 2007; Elga 2007; Enoch 2010; Foley 2001; Pasnau 2015). Certainly, many contemporary and urgent debates do not display this structure (Frances 2010; 2014; King 2011; Matheson 2014). Additionally, there is an on-going debate about the context-sensitivity in the link between expertise and political legitimacy (Peter 2019).

It is imperative to clarify the structure and conditions of epistemic conflict. *Who* is to decide who counts as an epistemic equal/expert; *how* do they decide this; *what are the historically, socially, and politically contingent grounds* for that decision; *what are the practical consequences* of this decision *prior* to engaging in epistemic conflict; how do these factors translate into *the experience of epistemic conflict*? How is (non-)knowledge bound up *with relations of power and oppression*?

This postgraduate conference is an interdisciplinary endeavour to work on the very foundations of epistemic conflict in contemporary societies. The conference welcomes contributions from postgraduate students and early-career researchers from sociology, political theory, philosophy and related disciplines. Further, we invite authors working in decolonial/post-colonial studies, feminism, critical phenomenology, and gender theory, to present their insights.

Topics of interest for submission include, but are not limited to:

- What is an epistemic conflict? How can we resolve them effectively?
- What constitutes an expert?
- How do processes of racialization and intersecting social relations of power enter into the construction of and disqualification for the role of 'expert'?
- How is lay/counter-expertise being used to challenge expertise?
- What can we learn from the experience of epistemic conflict?
- What is/should be the role of experts in democratic decision-making procedures?
- Who are the actors that draw the line between expertise/ignorance, knowledge/nonknowledge? How do they draw this line?
- How can ‘the authority of the expert’ function to occlude dissent in public debates?
- What is the role of ideology, socialization, or hegemony in the construction of expert discourses?

Submission details:

Please send an abstract (300-500 words) to epistemicconflict2021@gmail.com. Proposed papers should be suitable for 20 minutes-presentations. Proposals should contain the paper’s title and keywords and should be suitable for blind review. Please list the author’s details (name, institution, e-mail and qualification) in the body of the email. The submission deadline is **Sunday 13th June 2021**. Notifications will be sent out by **28th June**. This conference is jointly hosted by PhD candidates at the departments of Sociology, Government, and the School of Philosophy and Art History at the University of Essex, with help from [CRESI](#) and [cIDA](#). The conference will take place online via Zoom.