

Reading texts

On an historical intervention in the Australian academy: Recognising First Nations' epistemic traditions and their significance for governance.

Top End STS plans a collection of short essays offering readings of texts which are taken here as comprising a small archive articulating a historical move in political philosophy of knowledge that began in the Australian academy in the late 1980s.

In 2026 "Elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders knowledge systems" is a research priority of the Federal Government.¹ The situation was very different 35 years ago. To get a sense of what was at stake in launching a move in the Australian academy to recognize and engage with Aboriginal knowledges and their roles in governance of Aboriginal people-places, we could plan a prologue which describes the situation in 1988. Back then, despite there being a political sense that change was needed, there was continuing blindness on the part of settler Australians to the idea that Aboriginal traditions of knowledge making and doing, what we refer to as epistemics, should be involved.

How the need for change was perceived can be summed this up with a quote from HC Coombes² who

calls into question the insistence of [settler state] policies towards Aborigines and their future which requires that they abandon the Aboriginal way of life and actively seek to become assimilated in [settler state] industrial urbanized society, accepting its work ethic and related values, acquiring its skills, and ceasing to exist in any significant sense as a distinctive people within Australian society.³

This section of the planned volume will describe how in 1988 as such calls were being made across the wider Australian polity, the Australian academic disciplines of philosophy, history of science, and anthropology all concurred that Aboriginal Australians merely had elaborated traditions of beliefs and culture. This was contrasted with the settler state where governance was informed by knowledge. As recently as 2014 a prominent philosopher claimed, "There is nothing in Australian Aboriginal cultures that is remotely similar to what we in Western European societies call 'philosophy'. However, it is possible to extract what might be called a 'folk philosophy' from the sophisticated systems of practical knowledge that enabled the indigenous peoples of Australia to live and thrive for many thousands of years in a mostly hostile and isolated environment"⁴

The historic politicoepistemic move in the Australian academy which we seek to articulate and analyse was launched by scholars working in the Northern Territory, where the colonial frontier was still live and felt on a daily basis in policies actively pursued in schools, clinics, courts and other settler-state contexts. The move to recognise Aboriginal politicoepistemics was driven by academics heeding the urgings of members of what are now named as First Nations polities that they worked with on-the-ground in institutional settings where governance was being explicitly contested.

As an intervention in politics of knowledge the push was launched from within the discipline of social studies of science, and could be named as working academically where metaphysics, politics, and epistemics intersect. Epistemics is concerned with knowledge practices-in-practice and seen as associated with tensions generated in the workings of institutions and organisations. When academic inquiry focuses on Australian First Nations' epistemic traditions and their workings in contemporary Australian institutions, it becomes clear that epistemic cruelty and injustice are immured in such tensions.

In beginning it is important to differentiate the term 'epistemics' from 'epistemology' so that we get tangled up *neither* with the Western philosophical concept of 'universalism' which pervades contemporary questions concerning knowledge, nor by the notion of 'commonsense'. In attending to Australian First Nations' epistemic traditions situated as they are in institutions warranted by explicit and highly sophisticated metaphysical commitments involving the acts and intentions of Spirit Ancestors, inquiry needs to evade both those categories which lead to an epistemic politics around incommensurability.⁵

Instead, we need to recognise that there is a politics around the ways that the incommensurability/commensurability relation is negotiated on the ground in situated practices. So, where and how does inquiry begin? The authors whose essays will be collected here share an implicit situated knowledge claim: epistemics are experienceable in participating in institutional practices, and in being experienceable they are articulable as metaphysically, socially, culturally, and politically situated.

¹ <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/national-science-and-research-priorities-2024>

² <https://unreserved.rba.gov.au/nodes/view/86366>

³ H. C Coombes (1994). *Aboriginal Autonomy. Issues and Strategies* ed. Diane Smith, Cambridge University Press. p.5.

⁴ Max Charlesworth (2014). "Australian Aboriginal Philosophy" in *A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand*, 2nd edition, eds. G Oppy and N Trakakis. Monash University Publishing. p.67

⁵ Verran, 2013: 147-154.