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ARTICLE 5

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Datafication unmasked 3.
Framing the resistance

December's article closed with the following question: *How can we reconcile our appreciation for technology, resist the myth?*

This piece is dedicated to alternative epistemologies as a form of opposition to dataism. Epistemology is a subfield of philosophy dedicated to the theory of knowledge, and how minds relate and interpret reality.

So far, I have discussed data-centred epistemologies: they exploit resources of the digital ecosystem in a neo-colonial fashion. Alternatively-produced forms of knowledge put instead the focus on practices of grassroot reappropriation of the digital realm and resistance to coloniality. As Halvorsen (2020) noted, alternative (as in 'non dominant') epistemologies make room for a multiplicity of ideas, imaginations, and practices to intertwine, revealing the potential for the "decolonization" of the datafied society as a citizen response to data colonialism.

There is a rich theoretical corpus that has elaborated various interpretations and typologies of alternative epistemologies. One is that of "epistemologies of the South", as an assemblage of knowledge generated by subjugated groups through their lived experience (Escobar, 2019). Whereas talking of "South" references the geopolitical disparities between global North and global South, I would like to highlight Milan and Treré's invitation (2019) to disaggregate the geographical dimension of the notion and look at the manifold Souths with flexibility.

It is also spoken of data at the margins. Conceptualising a division between centre and margin, this notion is used to explain how the centre exploits the raw materials and labours provided from the peripheries, transforming them into profitable commodities (Mejias, 2020). This concept also enlightens the plurality of technological productions and multiple, peripheral narrations and forms of resistance, addressing a diverse array of data vulnerabilities (Milan and Treré, 2021 forthcoming).

Anthropologist Escobar (2018) speaks in this regard of "pluroverse" - a plurality of universes where alternative epistemologies unravel, and where we can admire the flourishing multitude of non-mainstream elaborations of knowledge.

3.1 From knowledge to performance: data activism

The analysis of alternative epistemologies brings citizen agency at the centre of attention, shifting the focus from datafication to data activism. This allows us to delve into the practices of resistance from below that arise from below, addressing alternative data practices as expression of agentic power, both as acts of resistance and of sense-making of forms of oppression (Milan and Treré, 2019).

Milan and van der Velden (2016) connect these grassroots epistemic practices to the set of strategies and social relationships that bring together experts, communities, and epistemic objects such as software and data, inviting to focus on different modes of knowledge production. The authors theorise a continuum of activist strategies, that go from data's contestation to data's recognition and reappropriation, and to which correspond two ideal types of data activism: reactive and proactive forms of activism (ibid.).

Defining data activism as both a form of engagement and of resistance to harmful data practices, the authors draw attention to the data agency of users, not seen as mere passive receivers, but proactive and engaged participants to the digital ecosystem. Activities of sense-making nourish the shared imaginaries through which the actors perform acts of subversion and re-appropriation.

This three-part article aimed at raising visibility to the injustices users (and some more than others) are vulnerable to online, providing the reader with a vocabulary and a theoretical framework. Counter-imaginaries can be identified in the tools, narrative, and practices that social actors employ when opposing the hazards of datafication and data colonialism (Kazansky and Milan 2021). As every small action counts, the hope is that the reader surprised themselves with renovated force for opposition.

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