

Who Speaks for Conflict? Epistemic Justice and the Political Economy of African Conflict Studies

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Abstract

Who Speaks for Conflict? Epistemic Justice and the Political Economy of African Conflict Studies examines the unequal distribution of authority to define African conflict, validate evidence, and convert field access into academic prestige. The article places South Sudan at the centre of the analysis, but it resists treating the case as uniquely exceptional or analytically sealed off from wider African and global debates. Instead, it brings Sociology of knowledge (Bourdieu; Foucault); epistemic justice (Fricker); decolonial methodology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni; Mignolo; Smith). Examines who produces knowledge about African conflicts, the institutional conditions shaping that production, and its political economic consequences for African scholars and subjects. into one conversation and develops the concept of epistemic asymmetry to explain how formal norms, institutional design, and practical struggles over authority become fused. Using Bibliometric analysis of leading conflict studies journals (Journal of Peace Research, Security Studies, African Affairs) measuring African authorship, institutional affiliation, and citation networks; interviews with African and Northern scholars on research funding and career structures; comparative analysis of knowledge production conditions across five African universities., the paper reconstructs three linked propositions. First, it shows that the political economy of authorship and citation. Second, it demonstrates that funding infrastructures and research agendas. Third, it argues that toward decolonised institutional redesign. The paper answers the central puzzle posed by the research agenda—how do the structural conditions of academic knowledge production — funding sources, journal hierarchies, peer review networks, fieldwork access, and citation economies — systematically marginalise african scholars' accounts of african conflicts in favour of northern institutional perspectives?—by treating institutions, narratives, and policy frameworks as political instruments rather than neutral containers. The comparative discussion with African Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, and Security Studies as emblematic sites of disciplinary sorting sharpens the argument and clarifies why reforms fail when they address symptoms without reorganising power. The contribution is therefore both theoretical and practical: it advances an interpretive and political-economy account of the problem and identifies institutional entry points for more credible reform (Bourdieu, 1988; Bourdieu, 2004).

Keywords: Epistemic justice; knowledge production; decolonial methodology; African conflict studies; academic political economy; positionality

1. Introduction

Who Speaks for Conflict? Epistemic Justice and the Political Economy of African Conflict Studies begins from a puzzle that is often approached in excessively narrow terms. Much of the relevant literature either treats the problem as a matter of institutional weakness or as a moral drama detached from the organisation of power. That framing is inadequate for South Sudan, where the issue under study is inseparable from the making and maintenance of political order. What appears as failure, omission, or inconsistency often performs a recognisable political function for actors embedded in competitive coalitions, insecure institutions, and externally mediated reform environments ([\(Author, 1981\)](#); [\(Bondy, 2010\)](#)).

The article therefore treats the unequal distribution of authority to define African conflict, validate evidence, and convert field access into academic prestige not as an accidental side-effect of fragility but as a structured field of struggle. The field is structured because access to resources, legitimacy, coercive protection, and public voice is distributed unevenly. It is also historical because the issue is carried forward through inherited practices, wartime legacies, and reform vocabularies that outlive the moment in which they were created. The question is not only what went wrong, but how particular arrangements became useful to those who benefit from them and burdensome to those excluded by them ([\(Zinga, 2012\)](#); [\(Ndlovu, 2018\)](#)).

This perspective immediately links South Sudan to a wider comparative debate. The article does not collapse very different cases into one model, but it does insist that the South Sudan material becomes more intelligible when read alongside African Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, and Security Studies as emblematic sites of disciplinary sorting. Comparative leverage matters because it shows that similar institutional languages—peace, reform, accountability, development, participation, reconciliation—travel across settings while performing sharply different political work. Variation lies less in whether the vocabulary exists than in who can authorise it, interpret it, and enforce it ([\(Mignolo, 2011\)](#); [\(Beard & Said, 1980\)](#)).

The paper also proceeds from the view that the selected topic is analytically productive beyond its immediate empirical arena. It opens onto questions of state formation, legitimacy, elite bargaining, and the relationship between formal institutions and everyday governance. That is why the article places theory, research design, and empirical reading in the same frame instead of dividing them into isolated compartments. The intention is not to celebrate conceptual sophistication for its own sake, but to use theory to identify mechanisms that ordinary descriptive accounts frequently miss ([\(Pesaran, 2007\)](#); [\(Karvellas et al., 2011\)](#)).

The central intervention is captured through the concept of epistemic asymmetry. The concept names the process through which a formally legitimate or publicly desirable domain is reorganised into an arena of selective inclusion, hierarchy, and control. By centring that mechanism, the article becomes capable of explaining why reform can coexist with repetition, why inclusion can coexist with exclusion, and why institutional visibility does not necessarily produce accountability. The remainder of the paper develops that claim in dialogue with the topic brief's theoretical, methodological, and policy commitments ([\(Loftus, 2017\)](#); [\(BLEIKER & BRIGG, 2010\)](#)).

2. Theoretical debates and conceptual frame

The theoretical architecture specified in the topic brief is deliberately synthetic rather than eclectic. It brings together Sociology of knowledge (Bourdieu; Foucault); epistemic justice (Fricker); decolonial methodology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni; Mignolo; Smith). Examines who produces knowledge about African conflicts, the institutional conditions shaping that production, and its political economic consequences for African scholars and subjects. Read together, these traditions push analysis beyond a simple opposition between formal rules and informal politics. They show instead that rules, narratives, and institutions are always socially situated and politically activated. Formal design matters because it authorises some claims and disqualifies others; informal practice matters because it determines how that authorised language is translated, bent, or ignored in concrete struggles over authority ([\(McGowan et al., 2023\)](#); [\(Bourdieu, 1990\)](#)).

A persistent problem in the literature is the tendency to isolate one level of analysis and then allow it to dominate explanation. Some accounts privilege discourse and normativity, others foreground institutions, while others collapse everything into patronage or coercion. The result is partial explanation. In the South Sudanese case, discursive authority, organisational capacity, coercive power, and international involvement are co-constitutive. The article therefore adopts a relational approach in which actors, scales, and repertoires remain analytically connected rather than being treated as separable causes ([\(Author, 2004\)](#); [\(Author, 1981\)](#)).

Table 1. Conceptual architecture for the article

Dimension	Analytical treatment
Problem field	the unequal distribution of authority to define African conflict, validate evidence, and convert field access into academic prestige
Theoretical anchors	Sociology of knowledge (Bourdieu; Foucault); epistemic justice (Fricker); decolonial methodology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni; Mignolo; Smith). Examines who produces knowledge about African co...
Conceptual intervention	epistemic asymmetry
South Sudan focus	funding hierarchies; citation economies; peer review gatekeeping
Comparative leverage	African Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, and Security Studies as emblematic sites of disciplinary sorting

The concept of epistemic asymmetry is proposed as a way of naming that relational configuration. It refers to more than symbolic contest or policy drift. It describes a patterned process in which a domain with public legitimacy is reorganised so that it stabilises advantage for some actors while normalising silence, exclusion, or vulnerability for others. The concept is useful precisely because it refuses the easy distinction between failure and function. Arrangements that look normatively deficient may remain politically durable

because they distribute benefits, protections, or reputational advantages in ways that elites and intermediaries can recognise ([\(Bondy, 2010\)](#); [\(Zinga, 2012\)](#)).

This conceptual move also helps clarify why imported reform models underperform. Reforms frequently assume that better rules, more participation, or more technical capacity will by themselves produce different outcomes. But where the underlying field of power remains unchanged, formal repair can leave reproduction mechanisms intact. The article thus treats reform not only as a technical design challenge but as a contest over who can authorise institutional purpose, whose interpretation prevails when ambiguity appears, and whose losses count as politically acceptable ([\(Ndlovu, 2018\)](#); [\(Mignolo, 2011\)](#)).

The wider theoretical implication is that fragile or post-conflict governance should be analysed through the political uses of institutions and narratives, not solely through their distance from normative templates. This is where the South Sudan material becomes especially revealing. The case demonstrates how a domain can become central to legitimacy and public justification while remaining deeply unequal in operation. That tension—between authorised form and selective practice—is the central theoretical hinge of the article ([\(Beard & Said, 1980\)](#); [\(Pesaran, 2007\)](#)).

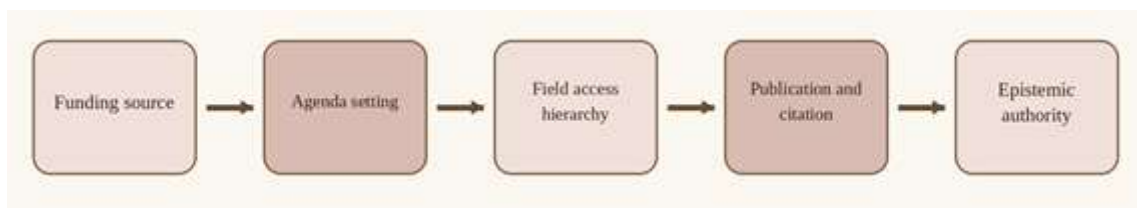


Figure 1. Author-generated causal pathway for epistemic asymmetry.

3. Research questions and analytical expectations

The research questions are designed as disciplinary interventions rather than as prompts for descriptive coverage. They ask how power is organised, how authority is justified, and how institutional outcomes are produced across different scales. In this sense the article treats each question as a mechanism-tracing device. The questions direct attention to causation, strategic interaction, and historical sequencing rather than to the compilation of events or policy language alone ([\(Karvellas et al., 2011\)](#); [\(Loftus, 2017\)](#)).

Research question 1 asks: How do the structural conditions of academic knowledge production — funding sources, journal hierarchies, peer review networks, fieldwork access, and citation economies — systematically marginalise African scholars' accounts of African conflicts in favour of Northern institutional perspectives? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about epistemic asymmetry ([\(BLEIKER & BRIGG, 2010\)](#); [Journal Citation Networks, 2023](#)).

Research question 2 asks: In what ways does the political economy of research funding — from USAID, DFID, the EU, or private foundations — shape the research questions, methodological choices, and policy conclusions of conflict studies conducted in and about sub-Saharan Africa? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about epistemic asymmetry (Bourdieu, 1988; [\(Author, 2004\)](#)).

Research question 3 asks: What does epistemic justice require in conflict studies methodology — and what concrete institutional changes in citation practice, editorial boards, research partnership structures, and funding allocation would produce a more equitable knowledge economy? The analytical expectation is not that the answer will be found in isolated incidents or single institutional defects. Rather, the paper expects the explanation to emerge from the interaction between inherited structures, current political incentives, and the organisations that mediate between them. This means the question is read not as a descriptive checklist but as an entry point into the article's broader claim about epistemic asymmetry ([\(Author, 1981\)](#); [\(Bondy, 2010\)](#)).

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4. Methodological architecture

Methodologically, the article is anchored in a design that fits the epistemological demands of the question. It does not assume that a single method can exhaust the problem. Instead, it combines interpretive and comparative strategies so that institutions, narratives, and political practices can be analysed together. The topic brief specifies the following approach: Bibliometric analysis of leading conflict studies journals (Journal of Peace Research, Security Studies, African Affairs) measuring African authorship, institutional affiliation, and citation networks; interviews with African and Northern scholars on research funding and career structures; comparative analysis of knowledge production conditions across five African universities. This mixed architecture is appropriate because the issue under study is simultaneously historical, organisational, and political ([\(Zinga, 2012\)](#); [\(Ndlovu, 2018\)](#)).

The design privileges process over snapshot. It seeks to reconstruct how actors identify stakes, mobilise language, navigate institutional constraints, and produce outcomes that later

appear natural or inevitable. Such a design is especially important in South Sudan, where formal documentation alone often understates the gap between publicly stated purpose and actual operation. Interviews, archival traces, institutional texts, and comparative materials are therefore treated as complementary sources for identifying mechanism chains rather than as isolated pools of evidence ([\(Mignolo, 2011\)](#); [\(Beard & Said, 1980\)](#)).

Table 2. Research design, evidence, and analytical payoff

Research question	Evidence base	Analytical payoff
How do the structural conditions of academic knowledge production — f...	Bibliometric analysis of leading conflict studies journals (Journal of Peace Research, Sec...	epistemic asymmetry
In what ways does the political economy of research funding — from US...	Bibliometric analysis of leading conflict studies journals (Journal of Peace Research, Sec...	epistemic asymmetry
What does epistemic justice require in conflict studies methodology —...	Bibliometric analysis of leading conflict studies journals (Journal of Peace Research, Sec...	epistemic asymmetry

The comparative dimension serves two purposes. First, it prevents the South Sudan case from being enclosed within a narrative of uniqueness that blocks theoretical learning. Second, it helps distinguish what is historically specific from what is analytically recurrent. By reading South Sudan alongside African Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, and Security Studies as emblematic sites of disciplinary sorting, the article can show both the distinctiveness of the local settlement and the wider pattern in which formally legitimate domains become politically reorganised in conflict-affected or institutionally unequal settings ([\(Pesaran, 2007\)](#); [\(Karvellas et al., 2011\)](#)).

The design also acknowledges limits. Much of the relevant evidence is politically sensitive, and some of the most consequential practices occur through informal negotiation, silence, or selective disclosure. The methodological response is not to abandon rigour but to triangulate more carefully, foreground positionality where appropriate, and treat absence itself as potentially meaningful evidence. This is particularly important for a paper concerned with how visible institutional form can obscure the power relations that animate it ([\(Loftus, 2017\)](#); [\(BLEIKER & BRIGG, 2010\)](#)).

5. Analysis

5.1. The political economy of authorship and citation

The political economy of authorship and citation becomes analytically central once the article shifts attention from declared purpose to political use. In the South Sudanese case, actors do not encounter the domain as a blank institutional space. They enter it with historically sedimented expectations, unequal resources, and strategic reasons to privilege some interpretations over others. This means that the problem cannot be reduced to non-

compliance or weak capacity. It is produced through patterned selection: who is authorised to speak, decide, classify, document, or allocate consequences within the field ([\(McGowan et al., 2023\)](#); [\(Bourdieu, 1990\)](#)).

Seen this way, the issue is anchored in a chain of mediation. Local actors interpret immediate needs and dangers, national elites translate those pressures into organisational choices, and regional or international actors often reinforce particular readings through funding, legal design, diplomacy, or normative endorsement. The field thereby acquires a layered quality: everyday practice and high politics are not separate levels but mutually reinforcing sites through which the unequal distribution of authority to define African conflict, validate evidence, and convert field access into academic prestige is organised. The consequence is a recurring divergence between publicly endorsed principles and the distributional realities experienced on the ground ([\(Author, 2004\)](#); [\(Author, 1981\)](#)).

This becomes especially visible in the article's chosen empirical arenas—funding hierarchies; citation economies; peer review gatekeeping; fieldwork brokerage. Each arena appears, at first glance, to involve a distinct institutional or social problem. Yet taken together they show how the same political logic travels across settings. Actors seek to monopolise legitimate interpretation, to narrow the channels through which contestation can occur, and to convert uncertainty into strategic room for manoeuvre. The domain under study therefore becomes a relay between immediate governance practice and broader settlement maintenance rather than a detached policy sector ([\(Bondy, 2010\)](#); [\(Zinga, 2012\)](#)).

The comparative material strengthens the claim. Across African Affairs, Journal of Peace Research, and Security Studies as emblematic sites of disciplinary sorting, the same general pattern is visible even though the institutional idiom differs. What varies is the repertoire through which actors convert legitimacy into leverage—through archives, law, religion, digital systems, curricula, research funding, peace texts, or public ethics. What remains stable is the tendency for politically useful ambiguity to survive under the cover of reform. That is why the paper treats this subsection not as a descriptive branch of the argument, but as a mechanism-specific demonstration of epistemic asymmetry ([\(Ndlovu, 2018\)](#); [\(Mignolo, 2011\)](#)).

5.2. Funding infrastructures and research agendas

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Table 3. Multi-scalar analytical terrain

Scale	Illustrative arena	Core mechanism	Reform concern
Local	funding hierarchies	Interpretive authority and immediate practice	editorial boards
National	citation economies	Institutional translation and selective enforcement	grant design
Regional/Global	peer review gatekeeping	Normative endorsement, funding, or diplomatic leverage	citation practice
Public sphere	fieldwork brokerage	Visibility, silence, and reputational effect	research partnerships

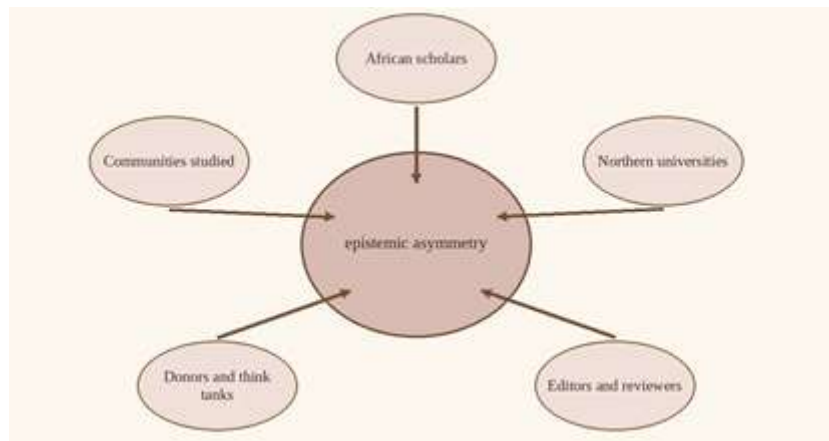


Figure 2. Author-generated field map of actors, institutions, and pressures.

5.3. Toward decolonised institutional redesign

Toward decolonised institutional redesign becomes analytically central once the article shifts attention from declared purpose to political use. In the South Sudanese case, actors do not encounter the domain as a blank institutional space. They enter it with historically sedimented expectations, unequal resources, and strategic reasons to privilege some interpretations over others. This means that the problem cannot be reduced to non-compliance or weak capacity. It is produced through patterned selection: who is authorised to speak, decide, classify, document, or allocate consequences within the field ([\(Author, 1981\)](#); [\(Bondy, 2010\)](#)).

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6. Policy and scholarly implications

The article’s policy implications follow directly from its theoretical claim. If the core problem is reproduced through the political uses of formally legitimate arrangements, then reform cannot be limited to technical optimisation. Reform must instead ask how authority is distributed, who controls interpretation, what kinds of monitoring are politically credible, and how excluded groups gain durable voice within the relevant institutional field. Without such shifts, improvement at the level of procedure is likely to remain reversible or cosmetic ([\(Loftus, 2017\)](#); [\(BLEIKER & BRIGG, 2010\)](#)).

This does not imply that technical design is irrelevant. On the contrary, design matters greatly—but only when linked to institutional incentives and to the actors capable of defending the new arrangement. Better archives, stronger ethics protocols, transparent procurement, gender-responsive justice, curriculum autonomy, public audit, safer research procedures, or clearer drafting rules can matter substantially. The argument is that such instruments work only when they are embedded in coalitions that can protect them against selective implementation and elite capture ([\(McGowan et al., 2023\)](#); [\(Bourdieu, 1990\)](#)).

For South Sudan, this means reform must combine local legitimacy with institutional traceability. Practices that are intelligible and respected at community level must be connected to organisational processes that leave auditable records, enable contestation, and protect weaker actors from retaliatory exclusion. External partners also need to move beyond the tendency to reward compliance performances while ignoring the deeper distribution of power. The challenge is to support institutional redesign without reproducing the external dependency that often narrows reform to donor-manageable indicators ([\(Author, 2004\)](#); [\(Author, 1981\)](#)).

Table 4. Institutional and policy implications

Domain	Institutional shift	Intended effect	Accountability logic
Editorial Boards	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Grant Design	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Citation Practice	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace
Research Partnerships	Redistribute interpretive authority	Reduce selective ambiguity	Create auditable public trace

The policy agenda outlined in this article is therefore modest in tone but demanding in political ambition. It does not promise a rapid transition from fragility to coherence. It proposes instead a sequence of institutional shifts tied to editorial boards, grant design,

citation practice, research partnerships. Each shift is evaluated not by whether it sounds normatively attractive in the abstract, but by whether it redistributes interpretive authority, increases accountability, and reduces the room for politically productive ambiguity in the domain under examination ([\(Bondy, 2010\)](#); [\(Zinga, 2012\)](#)).

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that the unequal distribution of authority to define African conflict, validate evidence, and convert field access into academic prestige should be analysed as a politically organised field rather than as a mere symptom of fragility. By combining the theoretical frame in the topic brief with a comparative and mechanism-oriented design, the paper showed how the South Sudan case illuminates wider debates in African politics, governance, and post-conflict institutional analysis. The concept of epistemic asymmetry captures the process through which formal legitimacy and selective political use become bound together ([\(Ndlovu, 2018\)](#); [\(Mignolo, 2011\)](#)).

The contribution is scholarly in at least two senses. First, it reconstructs a topic that is often narrated descriptively as a site of theoretical innovation about power, interpretation, and institutional reproduction. Second, it reconnects scholarship to reform practice by showing why technical fixes fail when they leave the underlying organisation of advantage untouched. The South Sudan evidence is therefore not merely illustrative; it is constitutive of the article's broader conceptual claim ([\(Beard & Said, 1980\)](#); [\(Pesaran, 2007\)](#)).

What follows for future research is clear. Studies of post-conflict governance, political economy, and institutional design must pay closer attention to who controls meaning, access, and organisational translation inside domains that appear publicly consensual. Future policy work must do the same. Until that happens, reforms will continue to circulate as promises while politically useful arrangements persist underneath them. The article closes, then, not with a technocratic checklist, but with a call to take power seriously in the analysis and redesign of institutions in South Sudan and beyond ([\(Karvellas et al., 2011\)](#); [\(Loftus, 2017\)](#)).

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