KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DECOLONISATION — NOT ONLY AFRICAN CHALLENGES

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1.   Introduction

The following arguments are in support of a "renegotiation of the terms of knowledge production" (Horáková 2016: 47). By doing so, this essay sides with demands by others (for example, Keim *et al* 2014) that "the need to move towards non-hegemonic forms of cooperation between academic realms and forms of knowledge is a practical-material as well as an intellectual task", while "no success can be achieved without relentless criticisms on inhered spurious certainties" (Lagos 2015). Last but not least, this reasoning is influenced by the conviction that 'neutral' knowledge in a value-free vacuum detached from social interests does not exist: "ways of knowing and resulting bodies of knowledge are always historical and they are deeply political" (Bliesemann and Kostic 2017: 6). By pointing to the relevance of hierarchical structures and power, this essay concurs with Halvorsen (2016: 303) that, "the academic profession must rid itself once and for all of the notion that knowledge is invariably 'positive', that every question has one correct answer (the truth), and that this is to be obtained through one correct method". After all —

> … knowledge of Africa has been produced within what we might define as a Western episteme. The theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources through which Africa is to this day rendered visible and intelligible speak from a place, about that place and in accordance with criteria of plausibility that use that particular place as the normative standard for truth (Macamo 2016: 326).

I concur with Smith (1999) that true decolonisation is supposed to be concerned with having a "(m)ore critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices" (Wilson 2001: 214). This is a necessary reminder that we should always include critical reflections when inter-

rogating our own internalised value systems, which we often tend to understand and apply unchallenged as the dominant (if not only) norm.

2.   Mapping asymmetries

"Knowledge Divides" was not accidently chosen as the sub-title of the World Social Science Report 2010 (UNESCO/ISSC 2010). Its chapters four and five provide sobering evidence of the fact that the current internationalisation — like its preceding stages — tends to reinforce the dominance of the North. In as much as economic disparities were integral parts of the unequal development on a global scale (re-)produced since the days of colonial-imperialist expansion, the world of science and knowledge production displays similar characteristics of inequality. As a result, "differences in the research methods and funding between Western and Africanist academia highlight the presence of severe global inequalities in the knowledge economy" (Cheeseman *et al* 2017: 4). Scientific dependence in Africa, dubbed as "extraversion" (Hountondji 1990), refers "to the fact that African scholarly production is oriented neither towards the local peers nor to one's own society, but towards the overseas public" (Keim 2008: 32). It corresponds with and is an integral part of the structurally anchored socio-economic imbalances (cf Weingart 2006). Foreign perspectives were imposed upon the continent and its people and are in mainstream African academia reproduced as part of the "North-South asymmetries in international knowledge production" (Olukoshi 2007: 17). As summarised during the 40th anniversary celebration of The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA):

> That knowledge has been *colonized* raises the question of whether it was ever free. The formulation of knowledge in the singular already situates the question in a framework that is alien to times before the emergence of European modernity and its age of global domination, for the disparate modes of producing knowledge and notions of knowledge were so many that *knowledges* would be a more appropriate designation (Gordon 2014: 81; original emphasis).

How global asymmetries are manifested in our contemporary academic settings is illustrated by the world's ranking of universities offering Development Studies as a subject. It is a clear reflection of "whose knowledge counts" (Standing and Taylor 2016). While reservations about the relevance of such exercises are justified (Teferra 2016), the current parallel lists compiled by QS and the Times Higher Education speak for itself. The QS survey for 2016 ranks the University of Cape Town (9), the University of the Witwatersrand (14) and Makerere (30) among its top 50 institutions. African universities ranked 50 to 100 include Cairo, Stellenbosch, the University of Johannesburg, Nairobi and Pretoria (QS 2016). The QS

survey for 2017 (The Guardian 2017) records a decline in the rankings for most African universities with Cape Town at 10, Wits University at 18, Makerere at 36 and — advancing on the ladder — Stellenbosch at 42, followed by Cairo and the universities of Ghana (new), Johannesburg and KwaZulu Natal (new) in the 50 to 100 rankings (in which Nairobi and Pretoria do not feature). The rankings not only underline the marginalisation of African universities, but also the intra-African asymmetries: two, respectively three, of the universities in the top 50 are from South Africa, as are five of the eight African universities ranked among the top 100. The World University Ranking (2017) by the Times Higher Education[1] in contrast, groups universities only under the category "politics & international studies (including development studies)" — with not a single African university in the top hundred.

According to a concept paper for a continental summit on higher education in Africa,[2] less than 0.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) is invested on the continent in research, with less than 1.5 per cent of the annual global share of research publications as a result. This quantitative dimension is far from being only the result of a lack of political will by those who govern. It also illustrates the impact and consequences of a historical process, which had its origins in the colonial-imperialist expansion of central Europe and the imposition of its forms of reproducing societies (including mind sets, ideologies and knowledge) for centuries to come in a global project claiming (misleadingly so) universality in character.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that African universities and scholars remain passive and are not engaged in searching for and establishing their own true meaning (cf Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). The international rankings only show that the performance of African universities is based on criteria, which are developed and applied elsewhere. Rather, a critical look at the definition and production of knowledge is necessary (Broadbent 2017a and 2017b).

3.   The bias in knowledge production

The vested interests and networks rooted in a Northern hemisphere ensure that citation gaps result in further marginalisation and gatekeeping: "certain voices do not command attention" (Briggs and Weathers 2016: 5). International bibliometric databases document the bias as "indicators of marginality and instruments of marginalisation" (Keim 2008: 28), testifying to "the common ignorance of the African publication sector in Philadelphia, Cambridge and Paris alike" (Keim 2008: 30). Meanwhile, Africa-based journals in the social sciences disclose a vast inter-disciplinary and multi-facetted world of discourses representing a wide panorama

of locally based reflections. These are not confined to some kind of irredentism but add insights to a relevant African as well as to a globally (or universally) relevant debate (cf Krenceyová 2014).

The asymmetries, however, are also reproduced in African societies. The South African system of higher education offers a prominent example. Despite many flaws and a current crisis of massive proportions documented through the ongoing large-scale student protests against the limits of a deeply unfair and unequal system — as documented by the #RhodesMustFall (Nyamnjoh 2016, Nyamnjoh 2017) and #FeesMustFall (Booysen 2016, Mabasa 2017) campaigns — it indeed compares favourably with most other African state policies. Academic indicators for the period 2005-2014, presented by Ishengoma (2016: 158) show, that with an average expenditure on research as a percentage of GDP at 0.73 per cent (rank 2), 405 full-time researchers per million citizens (rank 3) and 3 125 published articles in scientific and technical journals in 2011 (rank 1), South Africa is on aggregate highest ranked among the 22 African countries compared (including Egypt and Tunisia). In social and human science publications on inequality and social justice in the periods 1994-2003 and 2004-2013 South Africa produced the sixth largest number of articles of all countries included and was the 18th largest producer in the social sciences altogether (Callods 2016: 283f).

But such relatively impressive performance does not translate necessarily into an alternative approach to knowledge production. As the case of South Africa documents, the pitfalls lie, as so often, in the practice. In a laudable effort, academic knowledge production is promoted and encouraged through a material reward system for published articles in accredited, peer-reviewed journals. Such publications are reported annually by institutions of higher learning to the Ministry's Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) and receive financial rewards. While this is a welcome support mechanism, current practices by some South African universities reinforce the structural distortions: they consider publishing in Western academic periodicals to be of highest repute and hence allocate more money for such publications to the individual research budgets of their academic staff, notwithstanding the fact that the Ministry itself makes no such distinction and allocates the same subsidies to articles in all registered journals. As a result of such university policies, internationally accredited journals are considered as first choice for authors seeking to maximise their research budgets. This is an invidious vicious cycle that reinforces Northern dominance. Many of the 'international' journals (and indeed a wide range of local South African journals) are marketed by only a handful of commercial publishers at relatively high costs for readers while individual free access to articles is usually very limited. Therefore, knowledge production by the very institutions of local higher education is encour-

aged to remain an external domain by being linked mainly to prestigious fora abroad and not measured against criteria of 'endogenous' knowledge produced and disseminated locally. Such neoliberal market ethos, which reinforces a Western based dominance in knowledge production and dissemination, has also permeated African universities and keeps them closely linked to global agendas they only comply with but do not influence. Such "mode of thinking, and its concomitant market ethos of honouring a supply and demand principle and money-making as the most important value is rapidly penetrating higher education at the expense of the core commitment of a university, namely to educate citizens for a humane, just and democratic society" (Van Niekerk 2016: 33).

Jonathan Jansen illustrates that origin is by no means a panacea that protects from the virus of internalised Western supremacy as the exclusive standard-setting reference point. At a public launch of his book (Jansen 2017) he reportedly disclosed a surprisingly uncritical admiration for the US-American higher education system by repeatedly referring positively to Stanford University as his *alma mater* (where he obtained a PhD in education after undergraduate studies at the University of the Western Cape). Comparing this institution with South African tertiary education, he dismissed the challenges articulated by the current student protests, by "advocating an elitist schooling model in a post-apartheid context, all without so much as mentioning race, save for selectively denigrating the very concept" (Levenson 2017). Such dismissal of what motivates social protests on the campuses in one of the most unequal societies with an ongoing racial (and at times racist) bias linked to class, is a reminder that pigmentation and the place of birth are important but far from decisive factors pre-determining perceptions and views. They do not protect individuals from perpetuating a distorted world of knowledge production.

While taking a critical distance to the radical-populist versions of 'decolonisation' as articulated in student politics, Jansen (2017: 153-171) on the other hand engages also with the entanglement of knowledges. He points to the ambiguities and ambivalences in the context of a South African society —

> that endows all citizens with shared rights and a common national identity. (…) Of the contending conceptions of decolonization, the most fitting point of departure — politically, educationally, and strategically — would be active engagement with entangled knowledges. This approach recognizes the extent to which rival knowledges are tied up in 'entangled bodies' — living human beings who are globally interconnected and highly interdependent (Jansen 2017: 171).

What is also needed is an "entanglement" understood as a decolonisation of methodology; by "unmasking the modern world system and the global order as

the broader context from which re-search and methodology are cascading and are influenced" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Such efforts, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni insists further, should not be afraid of being labelled as anti-research because they do not comply with hegemonic approaches. Decolonising methodology "entails unmasking its role and purpose in re-search", to "re-position those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers, and communicators". This would also claim own space "rather than following Europe as a teacher to the rest of the world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Pillay (2015) points into a similar direction, emphasising the need to decolonise knowledge by interrogating the forms of knowledge, which "reinforce unequal power relations or inhibit our thinking about certain objects of knowledge in particular ways".

4.   Deconstructing relevance

Meanwhile, the meaning of relevance must be interrogated. Adebayo Olukoshi, then regional director for Africa and West Asia at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, questioned at the Times Higher Education Africa Universities Summit the notion of "world class" as seemingly global currency. According to Bothwell (2016) he argued:

> The mistake which we made over time has been to assume there is a defined standard of excellence, by which we must measure ourselves. Excellence itself is a changing concept and today's universities in Africa must speak to the goals of transformation. We have an opportunity to establish a much more nuanced and considered definition of ambition that speaks to our context.

By engaging with both northern and southern development discourses, Ndhlovu (2017: 11) suggests that, "perhaps the answer might as well lie in a judicious and innovative combination of previous and emerging theoretical traditions from both the Global North and the Global South". This, however, although it seems to be common sense, should not lose sight of who acts in which capacity in the process of seeking new ground and drawing the demarcations. There is a need to challenge the established ranking system indicators guided by purely Western criteria. These overlook that —

> … co-operation across the globe, *including* with institutions that are rated poorly in existing ranking systems, holds the potential to open up and renew global knowledge systems. Rather than increasing standardization and uniformity, we need to harness the creativity to which a multitude of experiences allow us access (Halvorsen 2016: 280f, original emphasis).

Despite laudable efforts by CODESRIA and OSSREA, the so-called postcolonial

sphere of local science, research and academic knowledge production (and its dissemination) continues to face an uphill battle. While the organisations have achieved a remarkable expansion of independent research and knowledge production owned locally, the academic domain has so far — if only for purely economic reasons — remained largely defined by external factors. Far from being home-grown, scholarly efforts were often restricted by global economic disparities and structures, permeating all other spheres of social organisation of life and work. African scholars facing the challenge are engaged in uphill battles to reduce such distortions (cf Mkandawire 2002). Despite their efforts, ownership remains in many cases outside the African realm or firmly under the control of government and "academics and technocrats who uncritically served" these (Mama 2007: 10) and, with regard to the power of definition, what is considered to be "truly" academic and scholarly, or relevant. The triumph of neoliberalism during the last decades has not eased the challenge. Rather, "the proliferation of neo-liberal practices in the institutions … force academics to pursue short-term goals without any connection to the public interest in their teaching", thereby "contributing to the emergence of a new 'crisis of quality' engineered from within the institutions" (Ogachi 2011: 44).

Last but not least, decolonisation remains a global challenge to which scholars everywhere ought to be committed, both at home and abroad. Acting in solidarity with such efforts, as Mkandawire (2011: 25) states —

> … the academic community must support their counterparts in Africa as they struggle against the ravages of the consultancy syndrome that rewards reports over refereed academic papers, against the repressive practices and criminal negligence of their respective national governments and against the pressures for the commercialization of educational systems. Universities should not wait for the initiatives of governments and donors. Instead, they must seek ways creating autonomous spaces for interacting with each within a 'commonwealth of scholars'. This will entail changes in the current relationship between African scholars and the university communities elsewhere.

Such interaction would also require a paradigm shift towards the plurality of theories, including a "Theory From the South" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) and is applicable of course far beyond African and Development Studies or, for that matter, Anthropologies (cf Boswell/Nyamnjoh 2016). Such "new theoretical currents, grounded in deep knowledge of and engagement with the realities of life in Africa, will be able to fill in the current void of theorization in the 'Euro-America' and to stimulate a global return to Theory" (Robbe 2014: 259). Over and above such fundamental shifts, there remains a need to equate sustainability with notions of justice, equality and civil as well as political and socio-economic rights

for individuals and collectives within a world of cultural and religious diversity, impacting on and shaping norms and values as well as life perspectives. This requires pursuing the same goals with different but complementary responsibilities to transcend not only geographical borders but also mental and narrow disciplinary confines, while paying respect and giving recognition to diversity and otherness when seeking and establishing common ground.

Hamid Dabashi (2013) criticises dominant forms of Western knowledge executing the power of definition. Challenging the uncritical admiration and celebrity status of almost exclusively European thinkers elevated to the commanding heights of universal philosophy and history, he wonders "what happens with thinkers who operate outside the European philosophical 'pedigree'?" and points to "a direct and unmitigated structural link between an empire, or an imperial frame of reference, and the presumed universality of a thinker thinking in the bosoms of that empire". While his further challenges (Dabashi 2015) do not present simple answers to a complex reality, they invite further fruitful and stimulating (controversial) exchanges. After all, as Pankaj Mishra (2014) maintains: "that old spell of universal progress through western ideologies — socialism and capitalism — has been decisively broken", since "Europe no longer confidently produces, as it did for two centuries, the surplus of global history" (Mishra 2015).

Maybe this is a significant part of the ultimate challenge: to question our preconceived ideas and values moulded in Eurocentric and other forms of ethnocentric, in the end anthropocentric socialisation and perception, guiding — often unconsciously — our interaction also in scholarly endeavours. We need to "trouble problematic narratives and discourses that are pervasively shared in the West, as well as within Africa", deconstruct discourses to challenge and stop "gatekeepers of knowledge … viewing the exogenous and endogenous models of knowledge production as monolithic (…) to move the debate beyond the binary of Western knowledge vs. local, or indigenous knowledge/worldviews" (Horáková 2016: 46). This would contribute to eroding orthodoxy and fundamentalisms in their diverse forms of articulation, impacting social and political realities in all parts of our world. At the same time, this is far more than a cognitive challenge: "an alternative epistemology cannot solve the structural symbolic violence displayed among worldviews and forms of knowledge by itself; therefore, any dialectical hermeneutic needs to be combined with a critical theory of society and power" (Lagos 2015).

African scholars, aware of and sensitised by the history of marginalisation and dehumanisation inherent to our dominant worldviews and penetrating academic discourses and paradigms, might have even more to offer than many scholars from other parts of the world in counteracting "the discrete charm of

European Intellectuals" (Dabashi 2009). Interaction by listening and learning might help us to become more aware in creating a social contract also in academia, which pursues the ultimate justification of scholarly engagement: to find ways and means to generate and apply knowledge (at times also in the form of simple insights) that is able to contribute to a better world.

> Development needs to be reframed from narrowly tackling poverty and vulnerability, to navigating complex challenges in ways that reduce inequalities and build more sustainable, inclusive and secure futures for people and societies.
>
> We need a universal framing of development that recognises these challenges as matters for everyone, everywhere, from London to Lagos, from South England to the sub-Sahara, and Brighton as well as Beijing (Aghajanian and Allouche 2016: 6).

Endnotes

1.　　　https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/subject-ranking/social-sciences#!/page/3/length/25/subjects/3090/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats, accessed 10 July 2017.
2.　　　Published on 17 March 2015 as: "Africa Focus, Africa: Higher Education Must be Higher Priority", available at: http://allafrica.com/stories/201503190891.html.

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