



Beyond Epistemology: Challenges and Pitfalls in Decolonising Knowledge Production¹

Henning Melber*

Abstract

An ambitious initiative to reform tertiary education in South Africa recommended a 'transformative plan towards a post-imperial and post-colonial relationship to the world of knowledge'. However, while Eurocentrism is mentioned as an obstacle, neither epistemology nor the institutional structures of higher learning are questioned in principle. This reflects the limits of system-immanent approaches. In contrast, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns on campuses indicated that further serious efforts were required. Epistemological changes are a step in the aspired direction, but it is argued that they fall short of decolonisation if the structural constraints in a society reproduce the former class- (and gender-) related patterns of dominance. The mission remains unaccomplished if a 'decolonial' or 'post-colonial' epistemology is cultivated in the inherited structures of dominance, privilege and discrimination. Positionalities matter. This article summarises the underlying patterns of Eurocentric dominance and its pitfalls, with the aim of highlighting the challenges beyond epistemological decolonisation.

Keywords: Epistemological decolonisation, knowledge production, global asymmetries, African positionality, Eurocentrism, Western dominance

Résumé

Une initiative ambitieuse visant à réformer l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud a recommandé un « plan transformateur vers une relation post-impériale et post-coloniale au monde du savoir ». Toutefois, bien que l'eurocentrisme soit mentionné comme un obstacle, ni l'épistémologie ni les structures institutionnelles de l'enseignement supérieur ne sont fondamentalement remises en question. Cela reflète les limites des approches internes au système. En revanche, les campagnes #RhodesMustFall et #FeesMustFall sur les campus ont montré que des efforts supplémentaires

* Extraordinary Professor, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Email: Henning.Melber@nai.uu.se

sérieux étaient nécessaires. Les changements épistémologiques constituent une étape dans la direction souhaitée, mais il est soutenu qu'ils restent insuffisants pour une véritable décolonisation si les contraintes structurelles d'une société reproduisent les anciens schémas de domination liés aux classes (et au genre). La mission demeure inachevée si une épistémologie « décoloniale » ou « post-coloniale » est développée au sein de structures héritées de domination, de privilège et de discrimination. Les positions sociales comptent. Cet article résume les schémas sous-jacents de la domination eurocentrique et ses pièges, dans le but d'attirer l'attention sur les défis au-delà de la décolonisation épistémologique.

Mots-clés : Décolonisation épistémologique, production de connaissances, asymétries globales, positionnalité africaine, eurocentrisme, domination occidentale

Introduction

On the initiative of the South African government's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), a *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* mapped an ambitious plan for reform of tertiary education in the country. It recommended a 'transformative and far reaching' Implementation Plan for 'redefining the landscape of institutions' (Republic of South Africa 2011: 17). An African Renaissance programme was designed to 'reflect on the past, present and future of the continent' with the aim 'to define a dignified, post-imperial and post-colonial relationship to the world of knowledge' (Republic of South Africa 2011: 19 and 25). However, while Eurocentrism as a factor affecting the transfer of knowledge is mentioned, epistemology is not identified as a significant marker, and neither are the institutional structures of higher learning questioned in principle; rather, they are treated as a matter of quantitative expansion. While the Charter is a showpiece of reformist intentions, it also reflects the limits of system-immanent approaches.

This article does not engage with the declared reform aspirations of this Charter. Suffice it to say that the subsequent protest movements culminating in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns on the campuses were an indication that serious further efforts were required to achieve true emancipation. While #RhodesMustFall signified the hidden and less hidden forms of a perpetuation of colonial mindsets, #FeesMustFall was a reminder that visual adjustments in daily life and mnemoscape are not enough. Epistemological changes are a step in the aspired direction but fall short of decolonisation if the structural constraints in a society reproduce the former class- (and gender-) related patterns of dominance. This goes beyond the colour of the skin. What is at stake is the decolonisation of the university (Gopal 2021).

While such a pointer does not dismiss the need for epistemological decolonisation, it serves as a reminder that the mission remains unaccomplished. If a 'decolonial' or – in the case of South Africa 'post-1994' – epistemology (whichever way it is understood) is cultivated in the inherited structures of dominance, privilege and discrimination, it covers up the perpetuation of social (in the sense of socio-economic) injustice. Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis (2024: 1) have illustrated the 'neoliberal labyrinth', with reference to South Africa, in which 'the epistemic freedom of academics within higher education across the Global South is imperilled'. In a related perspective, Serunkuma (2024: 10) highlights the 'Tragedian entrapment of an African scholar' as a decolonial dilemma, when their participation in the 'global knowledge commonwealth' is an integral part 'of the revolving doors and constantly mutating infrastructures of colonialist hegemony and control'.

This is not confined to African scholars serving as 'showpieces' of global open-minded interaction, creating the misleading impression of equal partners. When it comes to the advocacy of fundamental social alternatives in support of transformation, it is a dilemma facing scholars in academia generally: 'One of the tricks that Western modernity plays on intellectuals is to allow them only to produce revolutionary ideas in reactionary institutions' (Santos 2018: 3). This is one of the pitfalls of demanding epistemological decolonisation. It plays out in institutions, confining and limiting true social transformation.

Having painted such a bleak picture, one should not conclude that self-critical reflections on positionality and knowledge production do not matter. Rather, we need to understand and accept them as a necessary point of departure – positionalities matter (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg 2021). The following section presents an overview of the underlying patterns of Eurocentric dominance and its pitfalls, with the aim of highlighting the challenges beyond epistemological decolonisation.

Universities, Knowledge and Decolonisation

A programmatic conclusion by Adebayo Olukoshi and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza to a volume they co-edited for CODESRIA 20 years ago is as relevant today as it was then:

the fight for the African university must be seen as a collective struggle ... Part of this struggle will involve a reform of the university that is anchored on the evolution of a knowledge society that is at once rooted in the African context ... whilst simultaneously engaging with the rest of the world in line with the ideal of the university as an international centre for the advancement of science and scholarship (Olukoshi and Zeleza 2004: 617).

This puts true ownership at the core of the need for change, not only in higher learning, but as an integral and substantial element of decolonisation, self-identity and self-determination after the end of direct foreign and White minority rule over African societies. As experienced, this did not mark the end of White supremacy, both in structures and mindsets. A wide range of Black academic voices in South Africa have testified to this (Khunou et al. 2019). As aptly described in the Foreword by Zine Magubane (2019: iv), these voices ‘are about resilience, struggle, self-actualisation and survival ... how to endure the unimaginable indignity of having one’s intelligence, integrity and selfhood questioned at every turn’. They resolutely document determination to occupy spaces ‘and make them better for everyone – Black, White, LGBTQ, rich, poor, male and female’.

They are an integral part of efforts to follow and learn from Black intellectual thought, represented in a volume aptly titled *African Voices: In Search of a Decolonial Turn* (Zondi 2021). Spanning the long history of African knowledge, the chapters engage with the ideas of Mahmood Mamdani, Ibn Rushd, Ibrahim al-Koni, Chinua Achebe, Bernard Magubane, Marcus Garvey, Archie Mafeje, Molefi Kete Asante, Steve Biko, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Taha Hussein, Wangari Maathai, Claude Ake, Ali Mazrui, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Isaac Bangani Tabata, and Adebayo Adedeji.

In contrast to these genuine African efforts to mentally decolonise, my own limited contribution, as someone socialised in a Eurocentric context dominated by White supremacy, is to offer some reflections on what I consider to be a shared task for all in the process of liberation from a colonial history and present. I have done so also by engaging with the colonial legacy in my country of birth (Melber 2024). This is a process, in which dismantling the past and present of White supremacy must go hand in hand with a self-critical interrogation. It needs an awareness of what it means to be privileged by such a past, in the sense of ‘implicated subjects’ who ‘occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes’ (Rothberg 2019: 1).

However, such implications are by no means only a challenge for those socialised in a White supremacist world as ‘Europeans’ – they also affect those from groups who were formerly colonised, who have entered institutions and careers that are influenced, if not impregnated, by the colonial structural and mental legacies. This includes the spheres of higher learning in the African continent. These challenges have led to significantly

different individual approaches to positioning oneself within hierarchies and to the reproduction of asymmetric power in the transfer of knowledge. Korang (2006: 443), for instance, has described an apparent cleavage with regard to the understanding of 'African Studies': 'a line dividing those who denounce the "posts" and reject their Africanist validity from those who, if they do not embrace the "posts" wholly, are nevertheless willing to negotiate an Africanist accommodation with the protocols of critical and cultural understanding'. He ends with the olive branch that there is no need for an exclusivist choice between segregation in the particular and dilution in the universal: 'Obligation to "migrancy" – or the universal – and loyalty to "home" – or the particular – need not be mutually exclusive' (Korang 2006: 464). This understanding can provide a sustainable platform for exchanges by scholars from different backgrounds and social strata, aware of their respective implicated subjectivity, but in agreement of the need for changes in support of dignity, decency and equality, also in terms of recognition of the diversity of knowledges relevant for individuals and societies.

The West and the Rest

When Europe expanded into the rest of the world, it exported the local hierarchical concepts of knowledge and development and established these as universal. These concepts were largely internalised by those at the receiving end, both domestically and internationally, and have survived and remained effective in the global asymmetric power relations. These notions of knowledge and development have perpetuated hegemonic Western perspectives and are reproduced in the established forms of knowledge production and international collaboration.

'Knowledge is power' remains a popular slogan to motivate learners. Knowledge has different aspects: it can be liberating and emancipatory, but it can also be oppressive, intimidating and domesticating. Like development, knowledge is not neutral; nor is it value-free. Who uses which kind of knowledge for which interests and purposes? One cannot uncritically affirm and praise knowledge production (and knowledge dissemination and transfer) without examining the nature and intention of the created knowledge, its production and application.

The world is hierarchical and characterised by asymmetries. These impregnate the reproduction of societies and institutions as structures of power and interest, but also of contestation. Knowledge and development are among the important tools and instruments in the execution of power – and its contestation. Which knowledge and development is applied and what are its visions? Hegemony looms, as Walter Mignolo (2011) points

out, when universal knowledge in the singular serves as the reference point for a darker side of Western modernity, rather than the pluriversity of knowledges. Imperial knowledge represses colonised subjectivities. Structures of knowledge were built on a foundation of humiliation and marginality, as a 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2016: 492).

This is a significant part of the challenge. As Hana Horáková alerted, 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.

Mind the Gap

Scholars from the Global South are, in the main aware of and sensitised by the history of how marginality and degrading hierarchical North-South structures also penetrate academic discourses and paradigms. But a word of caution on the currently popular currency of decolonising development needs to be added.

Scholars and educators are part of the formal socialisation processes in societies, which means they are instrumental in shaping these through the way they operate. De-Coloniality, as Walter Mignolo and others insist, is a project that transcends but does not eradicate Western universal rule. As he explained in an interview, this transcending 'requires actors and institutions, and actors and institutions conserve, expand, change the structure of knowledge but within the same matrix: the colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2017). Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) maintains: 'The reality is that colonialism was never an event. It has always been a power structure with far-reaching consequences.'

The same can be said about the notion of 'development'. As Arturo Escobar already observed:

Whether in political science or sociology, economics or political economy, development has been debated without questioning its ontological status. From modern theory to dependency or world systems; from 'market-friendly development' to self-directed, sustainable, or eco-development the qualifiers of the term have multiplied without the term itself having been rendered radically problematic (Escobar 1977: 501).

Challenging such dogmas means questioning the normative legitimacy of a point of departure that has been taken as granted for far too long. For example, if internationalism exercises a power of definition over others and imposes values, norms, mindsets, and views on the rest of the world, it is of dubious value. So-called progressive political-philosophical ideologies and perspectives, rooted in Western trajectories, are by no means secure scaffolding. They all too often lack self-critical reflection questioning the mindset in which they are moulded.

The impact of the era of Enlightenment and the violent expansion of central Europe to the rest of the world is not past. It has left not only scars and festering wounds, but also a legacy. Gurminder Bhambra (2022: 236) pointed at the challenge:

How are we, as academics, scholars, social scientists and historians, complicit in the variable valuation of lives and experiences – at the very least, in our failure adequately to address the omissions and silences in those discourses and understandings that we know to be inadequate and inaccurate? And what can we do about this? The histories we use as the basis from which to develop our concepts make a difference to the adequacy and efficacy of those concepts. This requires us – and here the us is social scientists in particular – to be more alert to questions of history and historiography and both to the political economy and demographic diversity of who gets to produce knowledge of our past and the ways in which it shapes the possibilities of the present.

Challenging Eurocentric Epistemology

Being European, of Northern descent, or of any other background does not predetermine our worldview and convictions, even though cultural and religious factors, gender, and pigmentation (and the privileges accompanying the social positioning of many scholars in the Northern Hemisphere) should not be dismissed lightly when forming identities and mindsets. Whiteness, as much as White supremacy for that matter, has a factual side anchoring and protecting privileges. However, primary experiences and socialisation do not preclude processes of learning, change, adaptation, and repositioning. A continued supremacy of American–European social sciences does not offer scholars any excuses to abstain from joining counter-hegemonic narratives and strategies from within the dominant spheres of influence and knowledge production. True alliances should, in principle, be able to overcome boundaries and pursue shared values, and to question our preconceived ideas and values moulded by Eurocentric and ethnocentric, indeed often anthropocentric, perceptions that guide – often unconsciously – our interactions and, by extension, our scholarly endeavours.

One should not overlook or ignore the fact that there have always been challenges to this, even from within the belly of the beast. The European Enlightenment, for instance, embraced ambiguity, on the one hand establishing a rationality, which promoted a pseudo-scientific belief in mono-causal, linear progress and development as an all-embracing concept to explain and master the world, while at the same time, providing the tools and instruments for emancipation based on questioning this claim. The era of Enlightenment established a smokescreen to cover Eurocentric dominance through claims of universality, but the legitimising humbug of such claims was questioned not only by those raised at the receiving end of such an introvert, self-centred mindset, but also by some who were socialised within the system and supposed to be an integral part of its reproduction.

What Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called the *Epistemologies of the South* is not confined to a geographically determined entity:

Given the uneven development of capitalism and the persistence of Western-centric colonialism, the epistemological South and the geographical South partially overlap, particularly as regards those countries that we subjected to historical colonialism. But the overlap is only partial, not only because the epistemologies of the North also flourish in the geographical South ... but also because the epistemological South is also to be found in the geographical North ... in many of the struggles waged there against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Santos 2018: 150f.).

Emancipation from hegemony, power, and subjugation is a collective effort that crosses boundaries and is internationalism in practice. Admittedly, this is easier said than done. The controversy over efforts triggered by students at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University to diversify their reading lists for courses (Sabaratnam 2018) is a recent example of how initiatives towards diversification are meeting obstacles and ideological blinders by gatekeepers anxious to protect empirical nostalgia. Widely misinterpreted in the public sphere as the intended abandonment of European and Western social history and philosophy, it was denounced as cultural warfare and a betrayal of Europe's values and foundations. Meanwhile, adding other perspectives to the trajectory of Western thoughts and their expansion into the rest of the world simply enriches knowledge and provides a broader context when looking over the edge. If a hegemonic discourse is at risk because of 'narrative expansions' (Crilly and Everitt 2021), it speaks not for the strength of the hegemonic discourse. As argued by Wilson (2022), 'we cannot take library collections – how they are developed, described and discovered – at face value. We need to confront the biases that exist within those collections and, often, ourselves.'

The Case of Publishing

Publishing in Africa by truly African publishing houses (and not branches of international publishers, which seek to benefit from tenders for the local school textbook market) has been a subject of deep concern for many decades (see Gibbs and Mapanje 1999; Mlambo 2007). Unfortunately, and notwithstanding remarkable efforts by committed individuals (Suriano 2021), little has changed in terms of the existing asymmetries, despite some exciting new local initiatives taken on the continent (Bgoya and Jay 2023).

Notwithstanding a few remarkable exceptions and the persistence of initiatives such as the African Book Collective, the acquisition, publication, and distribution of especially academic works by publishers on the continent remain an uphill battle. Commercially, textbooks and, to some extent, fiction secure a minimum level of operational survival, though not always, as the latest sad example of Weaver Press in Zimbabwe shows (Mushakavanhu 2024). African markets for scholarly works remain small, and distribution networks are often inefficient. Even worse, scholars conducting research on subjects relevant to local markets tend to prefer publishing with internationally renowned publishers to gain the kind of recognition that promotes their academic careers, and these publishers unashamedly exploit their centrality to the fullest. The book prices, calculated for a limited number of university libraries, mainly in the Western and Northern world, speak for themselves. However, the exploitation, including the self-exploitation, of scholars who work unpaid as editors, reviewers and authors, is even bigger in the journal segment of these companies, who unashamedly exploit the desperate need to achieve credits by publishing with them.

What is required is a fundamental turn around, both in research collaboration and funding (Melber 2016, 2019; Dodsworth 2019; Dannecker 2022). If reducing asymmetric power relations in knowledge production and dissemination is to become more than lip service in Western institutions, Northern research foundations could, for example, include as a prerequisite to funding that locally accumulated knowledge has to be published locally. Publishing in African countries should be given the same if not even more recognition. Northern publishing houses should not be eligible for printing subsidies, while publishing with African institutions should qualify for financial support. Unfortunately, while there is a lot of talk, there is little or no visible implementation.

Such selectivity is also reproduced in African universities, where publishing in internationally renowned Western journals is considered more of an achievement than publishing locally and helps promote one's career. The turn

around therefore requires an effort to decolonise; it is not a case of only pointing fingers at the Northern hegemony but also challenging the Southern agencies that continue to reproduce such distortions. A recent survey of the lists of journals accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) disclosed the continued 'bibliometric coloniality' (Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Publishing in a journal on the accredited list attracts a subsidy paid to the academic's university, part of which is then transferred into the scholar's account to fund their further research. This makes it an attractive incentive and shapes preferences for where to publish, which also impacts further career promotions. The selectivity of journals on the list 'is a manifestation and perpetuation of the unequal geopolitical relationship that South Africa has had and continues to have with the Global North' (Heleta and Mzileni 2024: 15f.). It reproduces the Western epistemic hegemony, notably not imposed but self-inflicted. Heleta and Mzileni (2024: 17) therefore suggest: 'Strengthening existing scholarly publishing infrastructure and developing new scholarly indexes and platforms must be a key item on the agenda of higher education ministries, science bodies, and academies on the African continent and elsewhere in the Global South.'

Knowledge Divides was the subtitle of the *World Social Science Report 2010* (UNESCO and International Science Council 2010). Benefiting from inputs by two executive secretaries of CODESRIA, Adebayo Olukoshi and Ebrima Sall, it provides sobering evidence to the fact that the current international system 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 global inequalities in the knowledge economy.

These are also reflected in global university rankings, journal impact factors, and other metrics that claim to measure the relevance of knowledge produced and disseminated. They are indicative of the hierarchies. In the field of publishing and dissemination, a handful of international – mainly British, American and German owned – publishing companies are in firm control of the internationally recognised book market and journals, in which visibility is essential for an academic career. The vested interests and networks rooted in a Northern hemisphere ensure that 'certain voices do not command attention' (Briggs and Weathers 2016: 470). International bibliometric databases document the bias as 'indicators of marginality and instruments of marginalisation' (Keim 2008: 28). In a world of search engines applying 'algorithms of oppression' (Noble 2018), Southern voices remain marginalised, if not ignored.

What about the several South African university presses and other publishing houses that contribute significantly to academic debate by publishing African scholars? What about the considerable publishing activities by CODESRIA, both in the book and journal sectors? What about a publishing house like Langaa in Cameroon, which has played a significant role in scholarly publishing this century? And the list does not end with these few examples.

‘Epistemic power’ has a more pronounced meaning nowadays, as new information technologies and media reinforce comparative advantages for those who wield knowledge as power. If those in command in the Northern and Western hemispheres are serious about partnership and emancipation, they must scrutinise not only how knowledge is power, but also how power is effective in terms of knowledge – not least in the definitions and framings applied. Knowledge in its current dominant forms includes epistemic violence. ‘Unfortunate, but undeniable’, states Ahsan Kamal (2020: 73), ‘the Academy is the North.’

Decolonisation: More Than Epistemology

We must remain aware that decolonisation is a work in progress and requires more than merely focusing on curricula, textbooks, and other substantial aspects of knowledge transfer. Addressing racism in certain institutions is obviously necessary but it is not sufficient; we have to tackle institutionalised forms of racism in a much more general sense, understood as the fundamental transformation of societies. This must embrace not only all forms of discrimination and othering but also the material aspects of transformation.

The removal of the Rhodes statue from the campus of the University of Cape Town was (like many similar interventions elsewhere) a legitimate initiative, despite some controversial militancy of related protests. It is a step to restore pride and human dignity over racist supremacy endured for generations. But do the students, who pass the site where Rhodes stood on upper campus, achieve better learning outcomes than before the Rhodes statue was removed? If those living on the Cape Flats study with no access to electricity and find it difficult to make ends meet, their environment has not significantly improved. Material limitations, at times bordering on destitution, prevail. When food insecurity rates among South African students range between 11 and 38 per cent and they dream of starting the day with a breakfast (Pongweni, Caliz and Ellis 2025), something is utterly wrong. This does not strengthen the foundation for knowledge production and cognitive empowerment. The #FeesMustFall protest was, therefore, a logical follow up in their demands in support of the ability to learn.

The point is even more fundamental: does the beggar on a street, which had its Apartheid name replaced by that of an African freedom fighter, now enjoy a better life? Or does the woman battling to provide a decent upbringing for her children find a degree of comfort in the names of female role models in the public sphere when there is little material support? These pointers are not meant to be polemic but a word of caution: if we lose sight of the fundamentals that shape societies beyond symbols (while symbols do, of course, matter), we might mistake the means for the end – and fail in our efforts to achieve true decolonisation. Yes, students on the upper campus at UCT might feel more empowered as they pass the spot where Rhodes stood before their protest, but they remain hungry.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 42) advocates bringing about a pedagogy of unlearning ‘as part of epistemological decolonisation which results in the removal of that colonial/Eurocentric hard disc of coloniality together with its software’. However, this is easier said than done given the complexities of existing power structures – and more often than we realise, our own affirmative involvement is determined by the mere position we occupy and the role we execute, whether we like it or not. Therefore, it is necessary to throw a spanner in the current spinning wheel of popular demands to decolonise the software without targeting the basic hardware – not to obstruct, but to point at the pitfalls and traps.

Wahbie Long in the Department of Psychology at UCT warns us of the all-too-uncritical affirmation of postcolonial theory (or rather, theories). As he observes, ‘decolonisation seals us within a colonial imaginary in which the binaries of coloniser and colonised, White and Black become impossible to displace’ (Long 2018: 21). For him, ‘decolonisation activists, by and large, do not seem to take issue with the instrumentalisation of their education. Instead of a materialist reading of the asymmetries of academic life, they support a decolonisation agenda that centres on the notion of epistemic violence.’ Such discourse, however, ‘forms the ideological superstructure of an identity project’. The focus on epistemic violence risks neglecting the underlying dimensions of material facts and realities. By denying appreciation of the mind of others, such theory ‘cannot provide the moral vision we need’ (Long 2018: 21 and 22).

Conclusion: The Fight for Epistemic Justice

Long refuses to reconcile ‘to a theory whose practices would rehumanise some by dehumanising others’, a process in which ‘identity becomes the basis for political mobilisation as the possibility of universal comradeship disintegrates’. Such an approach, however, has certain consequences:

‘Whether unable or unwilling to frame their struggle in terms of the universal values of dignity, security and equality, protestors have opted for the particulars of White privilege and Black pain, practising a form of identity politics’ (Long 2018: 22). This replaces universal values with specific ones and is ultimately in the way of alliances of like-minded people willing to change the world towards epistemic justice for all.

Hamid Dabashi (2013) is among the many who criticise 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 do not present simple answers to a complex reality, they invite further fruitful and stimulating (controversial) exchanges (Dabashi 2015). 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).

Concerns of this kind offer a useful sensitisation – namely that the awareness of the asymmetric North–South (or any other given) power relations does not eliminate the risk of perpetuating epistemic distortions and injustices by blending out contradictions, challenges and other relevant but ‘bulky’ or inconvenient approaches, even within the settings of groups who claim to oppose hegemonic thinking. Their repositioning might risk entering new pitfalls: As Hamid Dabashi warns with reference to the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, such philosophy does not protect from falling prey to ‘the discrete charm of European intellectuals’ (Dabashi 2009). But the same is true the other way around: cultivating the anti-European/Western counter narratives is no guarantee of effectively dismantling and removing the disparities of power.

These cautionary reflections resonate with Frantz Fanon’s emphatic conclusion in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he stresses a willingness to open one’s mindset as a form of genuine humanism and true universalism: ‘I want the world to recognise, with me, the open door of every consciousness’ (Fanon 1967: 232). A search for emancipatory interaction therefore requires a paradigm shift towards the plurality of experiences, practices, knowledges and theories. This requires transcending not only geographical borders but also the plurality of the other confines we have internalised, while paying

respect and giving recognition to diversity in efforts to seek and establish common ground. Unfortunately, this leads to another challenge: how do we recognise otherness without othering?

A serious approach to epistemic decolonisation as a transformation of mindsets and widely accepted paradigms, must start with us. We have all been colonised. Socialised in unequal societies based on hierarchies, we have internalised fundamentals that contribute to the reproduction of these societies. This does not mean that we are predetermined. We have choices. As scholars we are supposed to analyse and reflect. And knowledge is indeed power – it depends only on which knowledge is used for what power. This requires self-critical exploration and reflection, and a change in perceptions and in our subsequent approaches to what we do and how we do it. We need to interrogate the knowledge we acquired and apply, and question if knowledge is indeed wisdom. We need to change attitudes and behaviour; we need to listen more often than talk as a necessary step of interrogating and ultimately transforming the concept and definition – as well as substance – of knowledge. Unfortunately, this is not the form of a class-based social struggle, which would transform the socio-economic fundamentals of material inequality. But scholars offering anti-hegemonic concepts and thoughts that resist epistemic dominance and violence can add to and promote an awareness, which can then motivate further emancipatory practical engagements.

Note

1. This is a considerably revised and enlarged keynote address presented at the Colloquium 'Decolonising knowledge production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts: Reflecting on a decade of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences in the South African Higher Education', organised by the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State, 27–29 August 2024.

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