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Journal for Research and Debate

# bodies and publics in two discourses

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The recent call for a conceptual and intellectual decolonization in the humanities critiques the conventional, all-white, largely male philosophical canon. Its critique is directed at the centering of the experiences of this specific group in global knowledge transmission practices. Its proponents focus on the canon's implicit claim, namely that only one social group is able to think thoroughly and accurately about all problems of philosophical significance across varying spatiotemporal contexts.

## 1. Preliminary Reflections

The recent call for a conceptual and intellectual decolonization in the humanities critiques the conventional, all-white, largely male philosophical canon. Its critique is directed at the centering of the experiences of this specific group in global knowledge transmission practices. Its proponents focus on the canon's implicit claim, namely that only one social group is able to think thoroughly and accurately about all problems of philosophical significance across varying spatiotemporal contexts. In this short article, I will use two different debates to make some aspects of this call more meaningful: the US-American discourse in academic philosophy on deracializing the knowing subject and the post-Holocaust German understanding of public intellectual spaces (sections 2 and 3 respectively). Notably, there is no principle reason to delimit the application of these discourses to their respective contexts. In fact, Jim Tully's work, which is briefly sketched in section 3, can serve as a conduit between both debates (see Kirloskar-Steinbach, 2019).

After the Holocaust, the re-education policies adopted in postwar Germany sought to sow the seeds of a democratic culture through the creation of what Anna Parkinson terms "intimate geographies" (Parkinson, 2017, p. 96). Accordingly, one sought to create "intersubjective spaces and communicative modalities through which discussion, conflict, and behavior [could be] negotiated, and [could] act to reproduce, or, at times to alter a society's habitus or social norms and ways of existing in the world" (Parkinson, 2017, p. 96). These spaces, one could say, explicitly encouraged speaking truth to power.

The involvement of the Frankfurt School's first-generation thinkers in these policies is well-documented. Despite some internal differences, philosophers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno worked to create a critical mass of intellectuals who would resist the lure and power of collectives, statist or otherwise. Adorno saw individual autonomy as an empowering force, which would enable a person to withstand communal pressure (see below). Under his influence, intellectuals in postwar Germany hammered out a blueprint that perceived the development of democratic institutions as a long-term normative project (Albrecht, 1999, p. 447). For its implementation, this blueprint relied heavily on a stable sense of belonging to a society which

valued democratic freedoms.

In Adorno's analysis, teachers were one group which could in principle abet the development of this sense of belonging. While they could play a crucial role in inculcating this sense, he assumed that this group was not sufficiently aware of, or was ignorant about, its own social role and the structure of social reality in Germany immediately after the war (see Albrecht, 1999, p. 404). Adorno placed his hopes in the development of specially designed teacher-training courses. If teachers' critical self-consciousness were to be trained, they could help to build up a new society that consciously moved away from the authoritarian mode of being to a democratic one. Education was highly significant in this respect: "The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection" (Adorno, 2003, pp. 21-22). Over time, this society would learn to appreciate, and value, democratic freedoms, including those of individuals who chose not to cooperate. Society would be aware that the bonds of its groups could be fatal since they were prone to encourage 'group-think.' Adorno used his own role as a public intellectual to underscore the importance of democratic institutions for postwar German society.

The following pages will abstain from developing a general theory about conceptual and intellectual decolonization in order to foreground this specific German situation. Another reason demands this deliberate abstention too. One key insight of the debate on conceptual and intellectual decolonization is that it behooves us well as academics to develop a more skeptical attitude toward our academic practices. One such practice is our uninhibited—and relatively unreflective—use of universal theories. In the humanities, we are generally taught to believe that the reality we seek to interpret can be adequately grasped through universal theories. However, these theories have a dark underbelly too, as we have learnt from critical accounts.

Although several universal theories in academic philosophy position themselves as harbingers of reason and progress, this self-positioning may turn out to be inadequate in important ways: Theories purported to have a universal reach may be able to capture only selective aspects of what is sought to be known. Their attempts to capture reality in one fell swoop across differing contexts may conceal those aspects which these theories have been unable to capture. This inadequacy may be passed over. It may even remain undetected, especially when the universal ability of these theories to track reality across varied contexts is taken as the default assumption.

In the light of the specific situation of postwar Germany and the aforementioned methodological reason, this article places itself along the lines of what Stefan Müller-Doohm calls "conscious-raising critique" (Müller-Doohm, 2005, p. 278).*1* Typically, a conscious-raising critique "is not objectively better knowledge, it is not formulated from an external point of view, but is based on the internal perspective of the culture. It takes its departure from the internal structures of distorted communication. It diagnoses internal conflict and contradictions not against the background of factually meaningful norms, but also of norms which have been established or have yet to be established as meaningful" (Müller-Doohm, 2005, p. 278). Against the background of these preliminary remarks, let us now turn to our first case: the discourse in US-American academic philosophy.

## 2. Deracializing the Knowing Subject in US-American Academic Philosophy

It should be relatively easy to make a case for conceptual and intellectual decolonization using an argument which leans on diversity. However, some warn about exploring the philosophical merits of

this questionable term of managerial repute. In their view, diversity is the self-marketing perspective of a university, which tries to contain diversity through its governance strategies. It is merely a means to "make the successful even more successful" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 110).

If one were to heed this warning, however, one would most likely miss out on philosophically-exciting literature which follows the trail left by philosophers' bodies on scholarship. In her Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association's Eastern Division in 2012, Linda Martín Alcoff called upon her colleagues to reflect upon the overrepresentation of white males in academic philosophy in the US, or as she put it, to think about why the profession was "demographically challenged" (Martín Alcoff, 2013, p. 21). Martín Alcoff and some of her colleagues worry about the crucial implications of this imbalance on the discipline. They are concerned that this group's social and epistemic standpoints may be simply reproduced, especially in areas in which philosophy is expected to deliver a careful analysis of justice and injustice. "[W]hite miscognition," which Charles Mills has documented in the history of social and political philosophy, will be continued in this case. Group privilege may not be perceived and/or challenged. Given that the aforesaid miscognition is a "structural phenomenon rather than the result of individual white myopias" (Mills, 2017, p. xvii), it will impact the manner in which the discipline as a whole is practiced.

Several philosophers in the US home in on the larger ramifications of this demographic overrepresentation, and imbalance. Some, for example, point out to results of empirical studies, which illustrate that homogenous groups, like all-male and/or all-white groups, tend to perceive themselves as being more effective and are more confident about their problem-solving abilities (see Bruya, 2017, p. 999). Others worry that this imbalance will have long-term detrimental consequences for the profession in their pluralistic society. They are concerned that a homogenous group of philosophers will tend to breed and support "epistemic arrogance" (Medina). Purported epistemic authorities will speak from standpoints of accrued credibility excess. If such a discursive practice is retained over time, they reason, it may lead to a "meta-blindness," "a particularly recalcitrant kind of ignorance about the cognitive and affective limitations of one's own perspective" (Medina, 2011, p. 29). If such "socially cultivated hermeneutical insensitivities" (Medina, 2012, p. 207) are not reined in, the society as a whole may render itself vulnerable to multiple sources of epistemic injustice.

The profession's lack of diversity is critiqued from another perspective too. This critique sets its sights on the subtle "boundary-policing" practices of the profession, which continue below the surface till today (Olberding, 2017, p. 1023). These practices seem to be driven by the premise that the cultural production of those hitherto excluded from the profession did not allegedly have "the potential to carry theoretical production" (Dotson, 2013, p. 41). Although one may consider such exclusionary views as mere historical curiosities today, the structures of philosophical knowledge production continue to propagate the belief that philosophical knowledge production is an activity specific only to the North American and European contexts. "Philosophy as a discipline," writes Michael Monahan, "remains white in the sense that it incorporates white assumptions, perspectives and traditions even while it claims to be universal and beyond such particularities as race" (Monahan, 2011, p. 220).

In their own ways, both lines of critique endeavor to bring into relief the embodied nature of philosophical inquiry. They push back against the "transcendental delusion" (Martín Alcoff) prevalent in the discipline. Philosophical inquiry is not carried out by disembodied minds, they

argue, but by concrete bodies placed in specific, spatiotemporal and socio-material contexts. In philosophizing, people make a concerted attempt at understanding the world around them from their own vantage point in space and time. For this purpose, they make use of a conceptual vocabulary which has grown out of the humus of common customs and life-forms. In other words, philosophical concepts have their own provenance (see Janz, 1996). They are generated in specific places for specific purposes. Philosophical activity, thus, cannot be meaningfully separated from the historical and corporeal particularity of its epistemic subjects. To be able to understand these local processes of meaning making better, we must ground philosophical content in different traditions. In grounding this content though, we must be attuned to the role socio-political factors play in the process.

Both these lines of critique can be deployed to make a case for conceptual and intellectual decolonization. In different ways, both argue for deracializing the extant belief about the ideal, representational, knowing subject. If the centering of certain bodies in the profession is a mere contingent outcome of certain socio-political processes, there is no plausible justification to continue this centering in a multicultural society, and in an interdependent world. In fact, this centering will most likely lead to faulty assumptions about our meaning-making endeavors in academic philosophy. These assumptions may, for example, lead homogenous groups to overestimate the ability of their conceptual frameworks to capture reality. The narrowness of their inquiry may be detrimental to further the development of that inquiry itself, especially when group members engage in boundary-policing such that an interrogation of the assumptions driving their inquiry is made impossible.

As this section illustrates, the claim that the diversity lens cannot be deployed to argue for conceptual and intellectual decolonization is unconvincing, at least in the context of some current debates in US-American academic philosophy. We also see that our willingness not to take this claim at face-value has borne fruit. We have encountered critical positions which seek to rectify current ways of doing academic philosophy.

Now, having come so far, one may hesitate to engage with our second case: academic philosophy in Germany. Even our introductory comments suggest that current practices there fail to sufficiently track the trail of a philosopher's body on scholarship, be it in teaching, or scholarly output. A mere cursory look at this context hints at the lack of a significant debate on the adequacy of the standard, all-white, largely male philosophical canon for a multicultural society and for an independent world, although theory produced in German intellectual and linguistic spaces has played a seminal role in the making of the current philosophical canon. The marginalization of postcolonial and decolonial minority scholars within philosophical departments is hard to overlook too. So, why engage with this specific context at all? Like in our first case, let us not give up prematurely. Let us persist.

## 3. Communicative Spaces and German Publics

If one sought to place the aforementioned call for decolonization within the context of contemporary Germany, we may need to revisit those intersubjective spaces and communicative modalities alluded to above. As we saw in section 1, educational institutions in post-Holocaust Germany were tailored to develop, and abet, a specific sense of belonging to a democratic polity. This belonging defined itself not through pre-given cultural determinants but through the making of a new society based on democratic freedoms. The communicative spaces designed for this purpose were said to be able to withstand the searing forces of a robust argumentative exchange, thus

enabling individuals to use these spaces to challenge the force of collectives. By placing this article in this particular public discussion forum, I would be doing precisely that. I would be using the space created by some German scholars, and afforded by this exchange, to shed light on current practices in German academic philosophy, which in my view distort communication within the German academy and beyond. So far, so good.

But how should one frame the argument such that it can easily resonate with frameworks extant within this context? One possibility would be, to use Jim Tully's understanding of a "civic philosopher." Such a philosopher takes her role as a *civic* philosopher seriously; she will allow for a "robust degree of democratic participation" (Tully, 2014, p. 319). In her commitment to foreground the societal and global implications of her academic work, she would be ready to (re)engage in the "art of citizenship," especially when co-citizens (whether of one's own society or of the world) voice their concern that certain actions have hegemonic and authoritarian outcomes for individuals and/or groups.

The "interlocutionary intervention" (Tully, 2008, p. 17) this article intends to present is a case in point. A civic philosopher will not strike down the article's claims with the counter-claim that the former has negligible philosophical worth because it is neither voiced by the majority of professional philosophers in Germany nor does it in any way impact German-speaking scholarly literature. A civic philosopher is open to the possibility that the "inherited languages of description and reflection" may be inadequate (Tully, 2008, p. 19). She may, be ready to concede – and perhaps in the long-run break up – with the "monological orientation" of the discipline.

Tully's views promise to be one meaningful contribution in our context. Not only has some of his work been translated in German. In some aspects, it intersects with Adorno's ruminations sketched above too. Tully's civic philosopher, who keenly engages with voices that contest, and perhaps even undermine, conventional opinions, reverberates well with Adorno's understanding of democratic freedoms being crucially dependent on critical individual inquiry. To thrive, a democracy in Adorno's reasoning depends on the "political, social, and moral awareness" of its citizens. One prerequisite hereof must be the capacity and courage of each individual to make full use of [her] reasoning power" (Adorno, 1999, p. 21).

Adorno would argue that academic philosophers cannot plausibly claim that democratic spaces are removed from their scholarly debates. In fact, they should value such spaces. They abet critical inquiry, especially when, for example, individuals use them to think their way out of constricted spaces whose "doors are barricaded" (Adorno, 2005, p. 291). After all, "thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation" (Adorno, 2005, p. 292).

## 4. Conclusion

As partakers of a profession that prides itself in its engagement with arguments, even contrary ones, philosophers cannot plausibly continue to diligently sidestep the call for conceptual and intellectual decolonization. Section 2 sketched how the work of some US-philosophers lays bare the "wonderful geographical doublespeak in the philosophy profession" (Martín Alcoff, 2017, p. 403) through which one geographical region papers over the contextuality of its own practices while simultaneously highlighting this very contextuality of other regions. While debates in current German philosophy have yet to adequately engage with the trail philosophers' specific bodies leaves

on scholarship, the societal context in contemporary Germany possesses resources that can be meaningfully harnessed for the call (see section 3).

Indeed, deploying these resources for conceptual and intellectual decolonization may impact the use of these resources in the future (see Steinmetz, 2006; see Kirloskar-Steinbach & Mika, 2019). In fact, this specific use may have substantial consequences for the philosophical canon as we understand it today, and perhaps even for debates in Germany's contemporary multicultural society.

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**Recommended Citation**

Kirloskar-Steinbach, M. (2020). Bodies and publics in two discourses. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate, 3*(7). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.7.4

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1. For Müller-Doohm, Adorno and his prominent student Jürgen Habermas exemplify such internal critiques in post-Holocaust German society, albeit in different ways.