

The Provincialization of Epistemology: Knowledge and Education in the Age of the Postcolony

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Provincialization and Deprovincialization

Education is a prime terrain for the transmission, facilitation, development and production of knowledge. This is a truism bordering on platitude. Universities, in particular, are literally defined in terms of the generation of knowledge. Given the intimate relationship between education and educational institutions, on the one hand, and epistemology and knowledge, on the other, it should come as no surprise that the decolonization discourses around provincialization of (Western) education should have come to include talk of provincialization of (Western) epistemology. My aim in this short contribution is to interrogate assertions regarding the ‘(de)provincialization’ and/or ‘(de)colonization’ of knowledge and epistemology in education and educational research and to investigate whether the postcolonial ideas of diverse and local epistemologies do not involve a mistaken sense of ‘epistemology’. I argue for an applied epistemology for the real world: that there are good reasons for an unequivocal and context-sensitive (albeit not context-relative) understanding of knowledge and epistemology in education and educational research – and for being able to distinguish between knowledge and non-knowledge. Geographic, ethnic, racial and gender-based differences do not constitute relevant criteria for any such demarcation. Instances in which they are cited as criteria raise questions not of epistemological relevance but rather of social justice.

Provincialization has been conceptually associated with “decentering” (Hindi: प्रान्तीयकरण; Urdu: بنانا صوبائی; see Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 3-4) and with “desuperiorization” (Freter, 2020): to ‘provincialize the West’ is fundamentally to ‘de-Westernize’ the world. What is behind calls for the provincialization of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mackenthun, 2016; Mbembe, n.d.; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 3)? And what exactly is it about Europe that must be decentered (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 4) or shifted from the center? The reasons why such calls are made are, from a social justice perspective, clear and plausible. Europe certainly has a lot to answer for. Following centuries of brutal colonial and other hegemonic marginalization, denigration, oppression and exploitation, the purpose is to challenge the arrogance, hegemony and alleged supremacy of ‘Europe’ or the ‘Western tradition’ (see Enslin & Horsthemke, 2015). The countervailing move emphasizes reclamation, restitution of dignity and value, re-cognition and protection (Le Grange,

2016, pp. 3-4). Regarding the second question, amongst other things it is Western educational and epistemological hegemony (Amir-Moazami & Streicher, n.d.; Streicher & Amir-Moazami, n.d.) and interpretational sovereignty that are denied pride of place and that are seen alongside other modes and systems of education, knowledge and interpretation.

The provincialization of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2004) and Western education has not only been linked with decolonization (Freter, 2020) but is in turn seen as a process also involving the deprovincialization, (re)centering/moving to the center or globalization, of, for example, Africa, of African education (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), and of indigenous epistemologies and knowledges (Ahenakew et al., 2014, p. 228), generally. Thus, provincialization of education, of epistemologies (Amir-Moazami & Streicher, n.d.) and of knowledge (Ahenakew et al., 2014, p. 228) is understood to involve democratization of education and knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 81), epistemological decolonization (Mbembe, n.d., pp. 2, 10; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 3) and Africanization of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, p. 81). But what exactly do epistemological democratization and decolonization and Africanization of knowledge involve? And what is it about so-called ‘Western’ or ‘Eurocentric’ education, epistemology and knowledge that must be decentered or shifted from the center (Le Grange 2016, p. 10; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, p. 80)? The most plausible response is that knowledge that had been ‘colonized’, appropriated, dis-owned and/or suppressed is now being reclaimed, re-appropriated, repossessed. In this process, the view that is vilified is the following (and here we notice a move from social justice to epistemology): achievement of reliable knowledge through objective, dispassionate inquiry can occur only when knowers are understood as separate from the objects of knowledge, and operate freely from subjective distortion and from the influence of society or culture. The maligned universalist view holds that this constitutes the pathway to truth, a universal method leading to a universal, value-neutral system of knowledge about life, the universe and (just about) everything. Knowledge not only renders possible prediction of how nature will behave, but it also yields the power to impose order on it and control it. By contrast, advocates of (de)provincialization emphasize ecologies of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 81), the demand for cognitive

justice (see Le Grange, 2016, p. 4; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 4) and condemnation of epistemic injustice, epistemic diversity (Mbembe, n.d., p. 19), different/diverse epistemologies (Andreotti et al., 2011, p. 40) or epistemological pluralism (Andreotti et al., 2012, p. 236), indigenous knowledge (systems) (Ahenakew et al., 2014, p. 220; Le Grange, 2016, p. 3), and alternative ways of knowing (Mackenthun, 2016). Key tenets are the following (see Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 6):

- The concepts of cognitive justice and democratization of knowledge acknowledge the significance of diverse epistemologies and organic, spiritual and land-based knowledge systems, epistemological frameworks arising from social movements and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded. They are about both institutional and epistemological access, making the sharing of knowledge a powerful tool in the struggle to deepen democracy and for a healthier and more just world.
- Higher education institutions today exclude many of the diverse knowledge systems in the world, such as those of indigenous peoples and marginalized ethnic and racial groups, and those marginalized because of gender and sexual orientation.
- Such exclusion often involves “epistemicide” (see also De Sousa Santos, 2014; Le Grange, 2016), which refers to the killing of knowledge systems, of “indigenous people’s knowledges” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, p. 3).

‘Epistemicide’ and ‘Cognitive Justice’

One of the major problems with (de)provincialization and decolonization discourses is that the ideas of epistemology and knowledge characteristically remain undefined, thus allowing advocates to use them in a variety of tendentious and even sloganeering ways. ‘Epistemology’ is a domain or division within philosophy that investigates the nature, origin and conditions of knowledge. It further means ‘theory of knowledge’, i.e. theory of the nature, origins and conditions of knowledge. Thus, the very least one would expect from advocates is a theory of the nature of knowledge – including articulation of the concept of knowledge they are working with. If knowledge is understood in the epistemologically relevant sense as adequately justified true belief, then what is there to be said about ideas like epistemicide, epistemological diversity or pluralism, and epistemic or cognitive (in)justice?

‘Epistemicide’ is a notion that has achieved widespread articulation and less-than-critical support. Thus, there is a tendency to apply it in a rather undifferentiated manner to all kinds of beliefs – irrespective of whether they amount to knowledge. Does rejection of views underlying rainmaking and ancestor agency amount to the ‘killing of knowledge systems’? Is the failure to allow flat-earth and geocentric worldviews in geography classrooms a matter of epistemicide? What about the refusal to teach creationism in

biology? Or the unwillingness to allow the counsel of active drug dealers in career guidance sessions? Similar considerations pertain to the ideas of cognitive justice and epistemic injustice. Surely there is a difference between rejecting someone’s knowledge-claims on the mere grounds that she is black or a woman (this would be both ethically reprehensible and epistemologically problematic), and rejecting the claims held or expressed by someone who happens to be black or a woman, because they are unjustified and/or false, or because they result from faulty or fallacious reasoning. Nonsense is not geographically, ethnically, culturally, racially or sexually locatable or specific.

A further problem concerns “nativism and ghettoization of knowledge” (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 81), which is likely to isolate particular ‘epistemologies’ and ‘knowledges’, thus rendering them powerless and irrelevant beyond their immediate sphere of application. On the other hand, the problem with equating centering and globalizing (of, for example, “knowledge from Africa”; p. 4) is that, in order to avoid a new kind of hegemony (e.g. Afrocentrism replacing Eurocentrism), all indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems are ‘centered’, in which case they are all considered equally respectable and valid, valuable and immune from critical interrogation.

There is also a confusion that characterizes Lesley Le Grange and Glen Aikenhead’s concern (2017, p. 32), which “has been (and is) with critiquing the dominance of Eurocentric sciences, arguing that its dominance is not because of its purported superior rationality, but because of European imperialism and colonialism – that its hegemony as well as its appearance of universal truth and rationality are primarily the outcome of military, economic and political power of European cultures”. But can one actually speak of “Eurocentric sciences”? Either the criteria for being a science are met, i.e. necessarily involving reference to laws or regularities, observation, description, explanation, prediction and testable hypothesis, or they are not. The authors appear to be committing a category mistake, by conflating matters of epistemology and matters of social justice.

‘Diverse Epistemologies’ and ‘Ecology of Knowledges’

In their defence of what they call the “ecology of knowledges” Boaventura de Sousa Santos, João Arriscado Nunes and Maria Paula Meneses, too, speak of the “immense” “epistemological diversity of the world” (De Sousa Santos et al., 2008, pp. xix; xlviii). However, on the basis of the premise that “there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (p. xix; see also Andreotti, 2011, p. 381), they relate this appeal not to different normative theories of knowledge, but rather to diversity across ethnicities and cultures, as well as to gender differences (De Sousa Santos et al., 2008, p. xix).

Beginning with the assumption that “cultural diversity and epistemological diversity are reciprocally embedded”,

the authors' intention is to show that "the reinvention of social emancipation is premised upon replacing the 'monoculture of scientific knowledge' by an 'ecology of knowledges'". In other words, "far from refusing science", the "alternative epistemology" envisaged here "places the latter in the context of diversity of knowledges existing in contemporary societies" (p. xx).

This exemplifies the recent but widespread view that ethnic or cultural groups have their own distinctive epistemologies, that epistemologies are also gendered, and that these have been largely ignored by the dominant social group. A corollary of this view states that educational research is pursued within a framework that represents assumptions about knowledge and knowledge production that reflect the interests and historical traditions of this dominant group. Thus, many theorists emphasize decolonization of knowledge, recognition of indigenous, local or subaltern knowledge systems and "radically different" epistemologies within a reconceptualized education. Other popular, related ideas are "local, cultural ways of knowing" and "non-Western" or "alternative epistemologies" (Andreotti, 2011, p. 385). Thus, "the works of Le Grange and Aikenhead have been essentially concerned with critiquing the marginalization, denigration and decimation of indigenous knowledges" (Le Grange & Aikenhead, 2017, p. 32). The authors assume, without providing any argument, that the notion of "indigenous knowledges" is a meaningful one.

More often than not, in such arguments for different, diverse, alternative, decolonized or demasculinized epistemologies some relevant philosophical issues remain unresolved, if not unaddressed altogether. What exactly do these claims about epistemological diversity mean? Do these ways of establishing knowledge stand up to critical interrogation? Moreover, how do they relate to traditional epistemological distinctions, e.g. between knowledge and belief and between descriptive and normative inquiry, and to epistemologically essential components like justification, evidence, warrant, and truth?

The Value of Diversity within Education and Epistemology

Emily Robertson (2013, p. 300) argues that diversity is both an epistemic and a moral virtue, but that this argument "does not support alternative epistemologies, cognitive relativism, or the replacement of truth as an epistemic goal by, for example, beliefs that have progressive consequences". The value of diversity for knowledge resides in the possibility of different groups having "different experiences that lead them to know or believe things that escape others' attention": reports of their experiences may function as data that allows researchers to examine the social system or structure from their social location (p. 304).

While postcolonial theory arguably errs in postulating the existence of diverse knowledges and truths, the diversity in

question is conceivably generated by (characteristically) practical epistemic priorities – priorities that emanate from different lived experiences, individual as well as social and cultural. A plausible view appears to be that knowledge and truth do not fluctuate, that they remain invariant across individuals, societies and cultures, but that there may well be distinctive sets of epistemic concerns that arise from personal, historical and socio-political circumstances. If it is correct to assume that practical epistemic and educational priorities will emerge from life experiences and from the ways these are socially articulated, then one might assume that, given the different life experiences of people across the globe, the practical epistemic and educational priorities will also differ.

For example, as Elizabeth Anderson (2002, p. 325) has put it:

No one disputes that personal knowledge of what it is like to be pregnant, undergo childbirth, suffer menstrual cramps, and have other experiences of a female body is specific to women. Gynaecology has certainly progressed since women entered the field and have brought their personal knowledge to bear on misogynist medical practices. The claims get more controversial the more global they are in scope. Some people claim that women have gender-typical 'ways of knowing', styles of thinking, methodologies, and ontologies that globally govern or characterize their cognitive activities across all subject matters. For instance, various feminist epistemologists have claimed that women think more intuitively and contextually, concern themselves more with particulars than with abstractions, emotionally engage themselves more with individual subjects of study, and frame their thoughts in relational rather than an atomistic ontology ... There is little persuasive evidence for such global claims. (Anderson, 2002, p. 325)

Interestingly, too, Anderson "does not suppose that women theorists bring some shared feminine difference to all subjects of knowledge" (p. 326).

Given, to take a further example, the experience of 'indigenous' Africans of wide-ranging cognitive injustice, it stands to reason that they would have as priorities matters of epistemic transformation and redress. If epistemic and educational concerns and priorities arise from different forms of social life, then those that have emerged from a social system in which a particular race or group has been subordinate to another deserve special scrutiny. Given the (especially vicious) history of physical and psychological colonization, it is plausible that one of the epistemic and educational priorities will be to educate *against* development of a subordinate or inferior mindset, as well as *against* a victim and beggar mentality, despite the continuing economic crisis and low level of economic growth. While it does not follow that particular historical and socio-economic

circumstances yield or bestow automatic validation or justification of (the content and objectives of) an ‘African epistemology’, an idea like ‘decolonization of African minds’ has a particular resonance here. Rather than implying a ‘post-truth’ epistemology, it involves Africa’s contributions to (world) knowledge.

If what has been established above is cogent, it follows that so-called ‘(de)provincialization’ and ‘diverse epistemologies’ refer neither to a multitude of truths nor to an ‘anything goes’ conception of justification, but rather to different experiences connected to particular social locations, or – as Robertson puts it – to different social pathways to knowledge (note the singular!). In this sense, reference to

‘epistemologies’ – like reference to “plural systems of knowledges” (De Sousa Santos et al., 2008, p. xxxix) or to indigenous, local or subaltern ways of knowing – is not only unhelpful but also misleading.

The promise of an applied epistemology for the real world, then, has in part to do with locality and context-specific relations – but not in terms of any exclusionist, ‘hands-off’ approach. Rather, it appears to be plausible that the particular historical, geographic and socio-cultural experiences of people give rise to particular priorities that shape their epistemic theory and practice – and also yield conceptual and epistemological tools that are likely to enrich education and educational research as a whole.

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