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11. BEYOND CLOSURE AND FIXED FRAMEWORKS

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this conclusion, we synthesise and reflect on the key themes emerging from the conversations in all the chapters in volumes one and two. Since it would be impossible to scan through all the issues flagged in the various chapters, we focus only on those that constitute the primary focus of our conversations, i.e. the epistemological and theoretical reflections that might have some bearing on future debates. The task of moulding these into a cohesive and comprehensible shape would not have been easy without the insights distilled from our constant engagement with the contributors throughout the different phases of this project, particularly at the colloquium hosted in 2015 by the University of Johannesburg. The colloquium was designed in such a way as to enable critical reflection on the general conception of this book, in order to jolt pre-conceived notions and mental sets, through a framework that immersed the contributors into the various epistemological and theoretical facets and strands of current debates. All contributors and a team of independent reviewers participated in the colloquium.

A REJUVENATED INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT IN AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP

Universities in Africa should reinvent themselves to find their legitimate space in an increasingly globalising world. This, at its simplest, is the message running through the two volumes in this collection. Two primary concerns underpinned the choice of the theme knowledge and change in African universities. The first is the fact knowledge has become the engine of change in all domains of social life. It is certainly what should inform all efforts towards revitalisation of the university. The second stems from the realisation that the struggle for positive representation and recognition of Africa in the global intellectual arena must mirror the real experiences, needs and aspirations of the African people, not simply the negative and often depressing representations of them within the colonial or Western epistemological logic. In this sense, for African scholarship it is a crusade for recognition and global scholarly affirmation. A major challenge in this context is the much needed critical review of the prevailing notions of epistemology, theory, research, knowledge, knowledge application to establish a solid platform for meaningful change in our scholarship and our universities.

While our past efforts adopted retrospective outlooks that confined our analysis to rhetorical critique of Western knowledge hegemony, we have emerged in this effort as activists who, through the voice of evidence, are determined to "promote a prospective and prophetic vision with a sense of possibility and potential, especially for those who bear the social costs of the present" (West, 1995, p. 171). In these volumes, "we look to the past for strength and inspiration, not solace and paralysis" (West, 1995, p. 171); we look inwards, into the African context, for reflexive critical introspection; we look outwards, to the global world, to borrow where necessary and lend our imagination where possible; and "we look toward the future, and vow to make it different and better" (West, 1995, p. 171) for our own sake and the sake of humanity in general. We recapture here the words of Prof. Rensburg at the opening of the colloquium: "I see here the emergence of a new intellectual movement, the strength of which lies in its commitment to set a new direction to the course of higher education in our continent". Our effort is a timely response to the state of desperation, open or concealed (depending on the political circumstances), but fiercely manifested in recent student protests in South Africa, Kenya and other countries on the African continent.

ABOUT CRITIQUE AND BEYOND

The Knowledge and Change book is intended to underscore the fluidity and vexing nature of recent conversations around research, epistemology and theory in African universities. It builds on the assumption that, although there is already a significant pool of postcolonial literature in the area of higher education in Africa, it suffers from shortcomings that need to be addressed urgently—hence the scale of human resources invested in the this book. We believe that, under current intellectual circumstances, our effort can only be meaningful if it makes a novel contribution to, or extends the narrow boundaries of the field, instead of rehearsing well-established arguments in the critique of the hegemony of Western knowledge in the academy, without considering the current West-Africa nexus in global scholarship. We did not, however, want to shut ourselves off from the opportunity to step back, backtrack and interrogate the discourses embedded in the legacy of critique of the West, with its assumptions about global power dynamics and power relations in the domain of knowledge. Such debate remains indispensable today, particularly in the context of emerging South-South academic dialogue which should be reduced to sterile ideological and intellectual muscling. This debate is now even more pertinent as early optimism has faded into what has now become a crisis of knowledge relations between the North and the South.

Beyond the legacy of rhetoric, we thus needed to pursue systematic engagement with the postcolonial literature, or indeed contemporary literature, on knowledge and knowledge production in the academy, particularly to map out meaningful pathways towards breaking constraining boundaries in African scholarship. This open-endedness of our agenda allowed for the convergence of an enriching multiplicity

of authors, questions, approaches and messages. What has been labelled by a publisher as "a rather odd essentializing notion of 'the African University', which does not seem to do justice to the incredible diversity of contexts on the continent" (personal communication, 2015) was for us intentional and purposefully framed to steer the debate more productively. Rather than narrowing our perspectives, our approach was meant to be a heuristic device to think through the diversity of perspectives emanating from the diversity of contexts within the African continent. More specifically, it emanated from a particular and useful construct: a metaphoric representation of Africa as a common space with a shared experience, as constructed under communacratic African traditional social and political institutions, as constructed by Western discourses, and as embraced by post-independence de-colonial projects. Such construct(s) also stand, regarding South-South intellectual movements and interactions.

AN INTELLECTUAL HOSPITALITY OF IDEAS

An effort was made in several chapters to bring about clarity in the epistemological and theoretical language of scholarship in African higher education, and in the context of African and South-South scholarship. This triggered a movement into the concepts and constructs at work in the current debate—concepts such as 'North', 'North-South dialogue', 'South-South dialogue', 'West', 'Western knowledge hegemony', 'Africa', 'African', 'Africanness', 'African University', 'Africanisation', 'Africa-rising', 'local and global knowledgeable', 'indigenous knowledge systems', etc. Two important insights emerge from various chapters. First, these are highly contested concepts and constructs, without single, undisputed meanings. They are used with different meanings or different connotations in different discourses. A common thread running through them is the idea that beyond their analytical function as 'categories of analysis', they are also used in a political and ideological sense as 'categories of practice'. From this point of view, they tend to raise social and cognitive justice concerns about egalitarian and hierarchical connotations (e.g. reaffirmation of identity; redistribution of power, privileges and opportunities; as well as the power of knowledge representation in marginalised societies). In this regard, interrogating and reworking these constructs remain a major imperative for future conversations. The possibility is also open that in the future, more appropriate categories could emerge, particularly through the pursuit of more systematic empirical work.

Second, in some contexts, these constructs are often articulated or received with a profound emotional charge that is not always conducive to adequate analytical vigilance. In such instances, we tend to view them through the tainted lenses of our academic histories and cultures, with a somewhat innocent reluctance to move beyond the boundaries these lenses impose on us. At worst, we may view them with anger, frustration and alienation, triggered by the colonial past or current disempowering dynamics in the academic and scholarly domains. The temptation towards building frontiers and seeking closure sometimes appears to be irresistible, and we cannot

all claim innocence on this matter. It is ironic that one of the guest speakers invited to the colloquium decided not to participate because the term 'African university' in the title suggested to him that the event was purely for Afrocentric scholars. This incident points to the need for de-clouding the intellectual climate in this debate.

At an international seminar in 1998, in an atmosphere where discursive difference and diversity tended to proliferate, one participant called for the need to develop "an intellectual hospitality of ideas" (Cross et al., 1998, p. 197). Vismanathan (quoted in Cross, 1998, p. 197) translated this idea as follows:

> Local knowledges, tribal knowledges, gendered knowledges, civilizational knowledges, dying knowledges, all need a site, a theatre of encounter which is not patronising, not preservationist, not fundamentalist, but open and playful.

We have experienced such openness in pulling this project together; the scholarly camaraderie and mutually supportive climate throughout the process leading to this concluding stage suggest that we should strive at all costs to maintain such 'hospitality'.

The concepts and constructs discussed above raise a number of questions: Should these, as analytical categories, be understood as an encounter between distinct intellectual traditions? Or should they be understood as an encounter between individuals with different perspectives shaped by their own or different social contexts? Or perhaps both of these standpoints might be relevant? Will such conceptualisations survive the tide of an increasingly globalising world? Can they provide adequate analyses in the diverse contexts that make up the African continent? Is there a principled way of closing the gap between African and Western scholarships? Does such dichotomous reasoning in a highly globalised world still hold? Are we prepared to move beyond current universalising perspectives that tend to overlook our complexities—which are concerned only with how others read and interpret our experiences through their own perceptions? What epistemologies are suited for making sense of our own lived experiences? Is there something about us and for us to learn from Western epistemologies? As stated elsewhere, asking such questions is not just a matter of "ecumenism of goodwill" (Cross et al., 1998, p. 194). It is a way of reframing the problematic which increasingly affects our understanding of, or engagement with knowledge production and utilisation on the African continent. In this sense, the chapters in these volumes stand not as closure, but as a challenge to existing frameworks, with a view to soliciting constructive, bold and innovative insights for the future of the universities in Africa.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH A GLOBALISING WORLD

There are two basic responses to the question of globalisation and its impact on the academic world, and both of them have their own relative strengths and weaknesses. The first response is the 'market place approach', with globalisation pre-determining the 'common place' of ideas and knowledge through market forces. This is entwined

with the idea that, in spite of the critique and rhetorical responses, it is unrealistic for the people of the South, more specifically Africa (the periphery) to think that they can sidestep the intellectual or knowledge patronage system of the West. The latter is driven by the world's most powerful forces—knowledge production and distribution institutions and their supporting economic agencies. Under such circumstances, the knowledge order is determined by cultural imaginary that circulates in the world market of ideas through the technologies of mass communication. This view is tied up with the conception of knowledge as an abstraction, as being essentially universal and a-contextual.

The second response is what West (1995, p. 167) refers to as the "go-it-alone" attitude very much embedded in narrow Afro-centric perspectives, which often calls for an arrogant insularity, dismissive of the global domination machinery. This response risks accusations of parochialism and narrow chauvinism. West (1995) says the following about such an attitude: "It is self-defeating, in that it usually reinforces the very inferior complexes promoted by the subtly … mainstream" (p. 167). It would certainly risk scholars being relegated to self-ghettoisation. What then are the challenges for overcoming this dilemma? The idea of a common intellectual personality in the global village is unimaginable, in the same way that the confinement to group insularity is untenable in the domain of knowledge and ideas (regardless of the degrees of surveillance, censorship, and violations of academic freedom and autonomy). The challenge is well articulated by Scot (1997, p. 20), in his reflections on the effects of globalisation:

> So long as the intellectual and scientific culture of the West persisted in its universalising claims, other cultures were marginalised, obliged to choose between imminent (and irreversible) redundancy and angry ideological opposition. But these claims have been eroded from 'within', in the cognitive sphere, by the radical scepticism that has always been part of the Western tradition and the epistemological doubts that have emerged recently; and from 'without', in the wider social and economic environment, by new patterns of knowledge production. As a result, the tension between Western and 'other' elite and democratic knowledge traditions has eased. Perhaps we no longer have to choose because perhaps we can no longer clearly differentiate them.

The reality is that African universities exist in the context of globalisation. This points to a response of 'coming along together', which rests on the following premises: (i) the realisation that, as a consequence of the colonial experience, the misfortunes of post-coloniality and the pressures of globalisation, African universities today operate at the interface of both local (African) and global (Western) spaces, and some of the imagery Africans celebrate in some discourses can no longer realistically be reclaimed; (ii) mutual engagement between the local and the global would ensure a balance between (global) universality and (local) singularities through suitable dialogue and conversations; and (iii) today's knowledge practitioners operate in knowledge intersections in which globalising and converging ideas are prominent,

although in an apparently singularised mode. Such approach to globalisation does not represent a blind concession to the essentialising and homogenising trap that has dominated Western discourses in the globalisation era. For lack of a better term, we refer to this approach in respect of the positioning of the university in Africa as the 'universal African university' (UAU). What is the UAU and how does it operate in the knowledge domain? We draw on a classic insight from Balibar (1997) to address this question. It is a university that in its mission does not seek "to affirm African singularities as universality, or crush singularities for the sake of global uniformity, or even exacerbate singularity to the point of isolationism" (self-ghettoisation). It is a university "that affirms singularity through the mediation of the universal and affirms the universal through the mediation of singularities" (Balibar, 1997, p. 175). In other words, the UAU is a university that takes cognizance of its African insertion in the globalising world "without losing its soul" (Downing, 2013: 1).

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