Democratising Participatory Research

Pathways to Social Justice from the South

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2. Coloniality and Decoloniality in the Global South Higher-Education Context

Universities have embraced or preached transformation and integration policies. These are unseen or even unheard of for many students within universities. They feel prejudiced because of certain actions portrayed by universities and other students different from them.

In January 2012, Thabang Makhoang from North-West University in Potchefstroom drowned in the campus swimming pool in what was alleged to be initiation activities. Instructions were in Afrikaans and it is said that he did not understand them well. The university claims that he had the option of saying yes or no to the activity, he might have agreed or not but the fear of isolation after not agreeing to the group activities was much higher than the fear of being unable to swim.

Keith Arlow of St John's College was alleged to have made racist remarks to pupils over an extended period of time. Despite being found guilty of serious misconduct, he was said to have remained, as the school stated that it is a result of mitigating factors.

This problem has also occurred at the University of the Free State where students and workers were harassed, violated and arrested for seeking the implementation of a presidential commission on in-sourcing.

The alleged victim of racism at the University of Pretoria is a Kenyan national. In 2012, a black parent was killed in a stampede at the gates of the University of Johannesburg, where crowds of students had gathered in the quest to gain admission into this university.

These are just a few of many incidents that have occurred and they have had huge impacts on people's lives. It all goes back to the issue of racism, which occurs within South African universities. It simply shows how much has not changed as much as people say things have changed.

Excerpt from *Narratives on Social Injustices: Undergraduate Voices*, the collaborative book by DCR members, 2018

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2.1 Coloniality in the Global South

There is a significant body of knowledge highlighting the social, political and epistemological transition that old colonies need to overcome in order to liberate their communities and cultures (Mbembe 2001). Nowadays this process seems to be central for many scholars and grassroots movements, as many countries in the Global South, while having overcome territorial or political domination, have, however, not succeeded in some other important aspects, such as the social, economic or epistemological areas. This includes processes of knowledge generation as well as higher-education institutions in general (De Sousa Santos 2014; Dussel 2007; Mignolo 2007).

In brief, since the fifteenth century, colonialism and imperialism have played a major role in the Western conquest of other nations and the expansion of Western power across the world (Parra-Romero 2016). Mignolo (2010; 2007) conceptualises this Western idea as the North Atlantic block, arguing that the Western space has been historically repositioned to the geographical point of the North Atlantic, which represents the domination of a European-American system. Furthermore, for post-colonial scholars, this phenomenon, as stated above, goes beyond the initial colonial aim of conquering territory; it is a political and intellectual invasion and exploitation of other cultures (Chilisa 2012; Wa Thiong'o 1986). Chilisa (2012, 29) states that colonialism was 'a brutal process through which two-thirds of the world experienced invasion and loss of territory accompanied by the distribution of political, social, and economic systems, leading to external political control and economic dependence on the West'. For Chilisa, this power over territories accelerated not only the loss of territory but the loss of local knowledge systems, cosmovisions,[1] and beliefs. Further, Wa Thiong'o (1986) supports a similar perspective, stating that it was a psychic and mental conquest, appropriating the wealth of other societies, their territories, and goods, thus establishing a colonised universe in which culture, institutions, languages and social and political systems are imposed as a unique and hegemonic world paradigm.

1 A cosmovision is the way in which an individual and/or a society perceives and interprets the world.

For post-colonial scholars, the colonial question remains a present and urgent issue. Wa Thiong'o (1986) uses the term 'neocolonies' to refer to the current situation of domination and injustices maintained through cultural and political constraints, such as colonial language and identity formation in the Global South. On the other hand, Mbembe (2001; 2015) names this state of affairs 'postcolony', referring to present colonial spaces which continue to sustain identity assimilation under a 'regime of violence' (1992, 3). Appiah (1993) and Wa Thiong'o (1986) use the term 'neocolonial territory', where identities are constructed through the codes of the coloniser, using their languages and admiring their historical figures as tools to construct a single, exceptional, valid history.

In brief, for many of these scholars, what is currently problematic is the maintenance of this system of domination, which is not colonial per se, but preserves dominant colonial elements across the world, especially in the academic field and the ways in which scholars produce knowledge and understand reality (Smith 1999). This Eurocentric domination is related to the onto-epistemological challenges highlighting the need to understand and critically analyse epistemic inequalities, which dominate in present-day higher-education institutions.

2.2 Deciphering the Global North Codes

The onto-epistemological challenges can be summed up by two demands: the universal ontological claim of Western sciences by Castro-Gomez (cited in Soldatenko 2015) and epistemic killing—epistemicide—by De Sousa Santos (De Sousa Santos 2014). Both critiques are substantial in order to understand the decolonial debate and the proposals for social justice and democratisation of knowledge in higher-education institutions. Firstly, these two colonial challenges perpetuate colonisation as a way to sustain hegemony (Escobar 2007). Hegemony is here conceptualised as a dominant system that establishes and balances two dimensions—'the good life' and 'the valid life'—inadvertently imposing them on everyone (Dussel 2007; Joseph 2002). These two dimensions represent a normative position, which is culturally related and attached to a clear Western colonial, and subsequently capitalist, tradition that conceptualises reality (the ontological position), whilst understanding

knowledge creation and its use in a particular way (the epistemic system).

Firstly, the ontological narrowness is based on a Western conceptualisation of reality as universal, which is incapable of understanding its own positionality. This idea is called 'zero-point' by Castro-Gomez and explained by Soldatenko (2015) as an 'imaginary position of objective neutrality that enlightenment science took for itself by displacing other epistemic frameworks in the colonial world as primitive, irrational and religious' (Soldatenko 2015, 140). To a certain extent, this Western tradition conceptualises nature as detached from individuals and assumes a universal, disembodied reality (Mignolo 2007). This stands in contrast with other perspectives such as, for instance, those of Indigenous communities who regard nature and human beings as deeply interconnected (Smith 1999). Hence, the problem itself is not this particular positionality, which is as valid as any other, but its imposition on others due to its self-proclaimed status as the only objective perception and investigations of our reality as human beings, despite our cultural and cosmological differences. Therefore, this critique is based on the influence of the unquestioned universality and superiority of Western ontological positions. Further, as Mignolo and Walsh (2018) recently argued, this ontology is, in itself, a Western and Eurocentric term, as it assumes that objects and subjects create reality instead of knowledge. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) clarify that in order to find a more accurate terminology, we will need to think about cosmologies instead of ontologies, as the former are able to overcome the limitation of meaning to objects, despite having other cultures that attach meaning to relationalities.

On the other hand, ontological or cosmological domination is linked to the epistemological challenge because, as Mignolo and Walsh confirm, 'ontology is an epistemological concept' (2018, 135). Hence, the imposition of Western ontology as superior also sustains a particular way of understanding the nature of knowledge and the processes in which it is produced, thus maintaining a hegemonic epistemological system. This issue has been named 'epistemological blindness' by Hlela (2018) or 'epistemicide' by De Sousa Santos (2014). Both terms refer to the destruction or invisibility of other knowledge systems due to the

'universal' perception of the Western epistemological canon as superior (De Sousa Santos 2014) or the inability to recognise other knowledge systems as valid (Hlela 2018). For instance, one example broadly referred to in the literature is the fact that Indigenous people need to validate their knowledge as rigorous, and therefore universal, by means of scientific procedures (Cooper & Morrell 2014). As Berenstain (2016, 571) clearly states:

> This creates a burden on the marginalised to educate and enlighten. Though the privileged demand the epistemic labour of the marginalised, they often perpetuate epistemic oppression by dismissing the knowledge produced. The marginalised are excluded from the realm of recognised knowledge creators despite contributing novel conceptual resources and epistemic frameworks.

Hence, epistemic oppressions highlight how hegemonic epistemic perspectives have narrowed the richness of human knowledge and wisdom beyond the Western epistemic system (Zibechi 2015).

Furthermore, these scholars do not deny the importance of Western thought or its philosophical tradition, conversely; they believe that this tradition is rich and has generated valuable knowledge, from other cultures and civilisations too (Dussel 2007; Mignolo 2007). Their issue lies in the fact that this system does not understand its own superior positionality and does not allow for a space in which knowledge could be considered or produced differently (De Sousa Santos 2014). Therefore, these cosmological and epistemological gaps provide the foundation for alternative pathways towards decoloniality, from a Global South perspective, that these scholars articulate.[2] Moreover, as higher education is the central interest of this book, the following section will explore universities with a particular decolonial project for social justice through the use of participatory research practices and its role in these debates.

2 It is important to mention that there are many other decolonial perspectives supported by other scholars but that this book, due to its aim, supports and explores this particular one. I will only refer to the pluriversal project as a higher-education, decolonial perspective from the South in this book.

2.3 Transforming Our 'Uni-Versity' into a 'Pluri-Versity'

In light of the complexity outlined above, what the universal project, the hegemonic project, ignores is the diversity of perspectives (cosmologies) and knowledges (epistemic systems) beyond itself. Therefore, a group of scholars (Boidin, Cohen & Grosfoguel 2012; Dussel 2007; Mignolo 2007; Escobar 2018) have developed a perspective that provides the heterogeneous foundation needed to reverse these colonial challenges; this is called the 'pluriverse' project. This project aims to transform a uni-verse into a pluri-verse better capable of accommodating the diversity that has historically been excluded due to structures of domination. Although the pluriversal project is extensive and fertile, I will focus here on its educational derivative, the 'pluriversity', in order to understand the foundational ideas.

In this pluriversity model, the idea is to transform a monolithic university institution into a less provincial one (Boidin et al. 2012). In addition, in this project, the fight against epistemic coloniality is substantial for the transition to an academic model which is capable of challenging academic knowledge production and practice (Tamdgidi 2012).

In this matter, the concept of an 'ecology of knowledges'—epistemic multiplicity—coined by De Sousa Santos (2014) is helpful for understanding the equal relevance of different knowledge systems and the possibility of bringing them together as a way of cooperation. De Sousa Santos (2010; 2014) asserts that every knowledge system is incomplete, due to its own internal and external limitations. Therefore, the incompleteness of all knowledge systems—including the Western epistemic system—necessitates an epistemological dialogue between them, which is called an ecology of knowledges. When scholars are able to interrogate their knowledge system and bring it into conversation with others, an ecology of knowledges is stimulated, and this is a necessary condition in promoting a pluriversity. Thus, this is a way to include Southern perspectives long ignored by the Global North.

The pertinent questions are: what are universities currently doing to challenge these colonial issues, and how can these strategies be improved or reformulated, if necessary? Do we decide to propose a solution 'within' or 'outside' our higher-education institutions? Is it even possible to achieve a decolonial project in the Western higher-education system?

This book seeks to conduct an internal analysis of what higher-education institutions are doing so far, and how these practices, specifically participatory practices, can be improved and stimulated by new theoretical insights, bringing methodological plurality into our research processes from a Southern perspective. However, before analysing and assessing different participatory practices, it is necessary to investigate how, if at all, participatory approaches are aligned with decolonial debates.

2.4 Participatory Approaches in the Twenty-First Century: A Decolonial Intention

Certainly, participatory approaches are related to certain values of togetherness, democracy, inclusion, heterogeneity and social justice, which are strongly represented in many categories such as Participatory Action Research, Participatory Research, Educational Action Research or Community Based Action Research, among others. These discourses are especially visible within the Action Research family, which, despite being part of the industrial strand, and the more conventional line of practices, nowadays embraces all participatory typologies. Hence, scholars tend to refer to many participatory practices as Action Research. For example, we may consider the many handbooks exploring different participatory practices that use Action Research in their titles, such as *The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research* (2017). Further, these handbooks tend to claim decolonial aims in different ways and among different families of participatory approaches. One of the latest compilations about the diverse practices of AR claims in its preface:

> We believe Action Research has a crucial role to play in the work of creating, an 'alternative globalisation' that counters the standard view being propagated by those whose interest lies in maintaining the status quo of colonial domination largely by the global North at the expense of the peoples, cultures, resources, and epistemologies of the global South. (Rowell et al. 2017, xii)

Equally, they state that '[they] represent efforts to push against various forms of colonisation of hearts and minds' (Rowell et al. 2017, xii). *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (2008), another reference for AR practitioners, states:

> Most of us educated within the Western paradigm have inherited a broadly 'Cartesian' worldview, which channels our thinking in significant ways. It tells us the world is made of separate things [...] and it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate [...] This split between humanity and nature, and the abrogation of all mind to humans, is what Weber meant by the disenchantment of the world. As Fals Borda has put it, participation is one way through which we may 're-enchant' our plural world. (Reason & Bradbury 2008, 8)

These works incisively expose the Western worldview, calling for a shift towards a more plural world. This is especially relevant for many of the decolonial arguments, which acknowledge the colonial imposition of reason over tradition in modern Cartesian thinking as a Western creation, and emphasise its perpetuation through imperialism. This is why they confirm that:

> Action Research without its liberating and emancipatory dimension is a shadow of its full possibility and will be in danger of being co-opted by the status quo. (Reason & Bradbury 2008, 5)

Thus, despite the diversity of practice within participatory approaches, current discourses of AR sustain and support the use of these practices as a way to move towards decoloniality. Further, the role of epistemic justice is central to this debate. These AR-focused handbooks expose the invisibility of other knowledge systems that are dominated by the technocratic and objectivist perspectives sustained by a hegemonic academic system. Additionally, the same book, in its most recent edition published in 2015 (Bradbury 2015), maintains similar ideas:

> While our theoretical groundings are informed by the post-modernist deconstructing of classical theorising, which privileged the objective observer with his ostensibly value-free language and logical deduction/generalisation, we also know that criticism is not enough. (Bradbury 2015, 3)

Hence:

> When action researchers think of epistemology, we understand the impoverishment of having only the objective voice of conventional social science. We are called to consider how multiple epistemological voices can be better integrated to serve our inquiry and our co-inquirers. (Bradbury 2015, 4)

And finally, the Educational Action Research Family pursues these critiques eloquently, expressing that AR aims to:

> Promote decolonisation of lifeworld that has become saturated with bureaucratic discourses, routinised practices and institutionalised forms of social relationships. (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2013, 12)

Therefore, the democratisation of knowledge, epistemic justice, and the promotion of a pluriversal world, or justice as a whole, are all examples of the challenges that the diverse and extended family of participatory approaches is aiming to overcome. Nevertheless, to critically engage with these practices, we need to analyse them and understand that not all practices and approaches might be directed to decolonise or democratise research in the way this book defends. Thus, the following chapter aims to clarify different traditions and goals within participatory research to uncover Western homogenising tendencies and their consequences. Doing so, we are able to highlight the pitfalls and shortcomings and advance towards decolonisation and social justice more broadly, whilst also defining an innovative participatory practice.

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