Book Review

Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni

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This book focuses on the history and politics of knowledge production and how Africa has been located on the marginal lines of such 'knowledge production'. Epistemic freedom is defined as cognitive justice, which includes the basic emancipation of African people to think for themselves; to theorise and interpret their own lived realities and existential experiences; to be able to develop and employ their own methods for conducting what they rightfully regard as research; and to write from their own ontological positions. Epistemic freedom is understood within the historical context of the 'dismemberment' of Africans from humanity: the dehumanisation of Africans as non-beings, including the colonial violence of relegating Africans as sub-ontological beings with neither history nor knowledge. This book provides a clear relationship between power, the ontological question of *Being* and the epistemological question of *Knowing*.

In the introductory chapter, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni provides a historical context for 'epistemic justice' by clearly showing that the epistemic line cannot be understood in abstraction from the 'colour line'. This locates African knowledges within the history of the dehumanisation of African people. This epistemological and ontological struggle can only be disrupted by 'provincializing Europe' and 'deprovincializing Africa'. The author draws on Ngugi wa Thiong'o' (1993) notion of 'moving the centre' to build on the decolonial epistemic perspective of 'provincializing Europe'. This process of 'provincializing Europe' challenges the dominance of European ways of thinking in all spheres of knowledge production and education in general. Colonization not only denied and bastardized knowledges from Africa, it also violently misappropriated African knowledges as European knowledges. 'Provincializing Europe' is fundamentally interested in de-Europeanizing knowledge and the world; and deprovincializing Africa.

Deprovincializing Africa is defined "as an intellectual and academic process of centring Africa as a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world while at the same time globalising knowledge from Africa" (p. 4). Deprovincializing Africa addresses the marginality of Africa in the knowledge and education domain through re-centring African ways of knowing and

thinking in knowledge production. The decolonial perspective suggests that there is no epistemic or cognitive justice without provincializing Europe and deprovincializing Africa.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni further argues that, central to decolonial epistemic struggles is the critique against what is known as western 'modernity' that brought about unequal human relations of social classification and racial hierarchization. Drawing on Amir Samir's concept of 'economic extraversion' (1963), then later developed by Paulin Hountondji (1996) to 'intellectual extraversion'. Ndlovu-Gatsheni posits that in Africa, "just as economic extraversion resulted in economic dependence, intellectual extraversion resulted in scientific dependence", epistemic freedom can only be realised through 'delinking' from this intellectual and economic dependence that sustain western modernity (p. 10). However, despite the intellectual dependence of African intellectuals and higher education institutions on the knowledge produced from the Global North, Ndlovu-Gatsheni draws on various African scholars such as Thandika Mkandawire, Toyin Falola, Dani Nabudere and Archie Mafeje, and illustrates the agency of these African scholars in how they resist the imposed Western ways of thinking and knowing – through producing Afrocentric scholarship. This introductory chapter concludes by proposing a decolonial epistemic approach to 'rethink thinking itself'. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the decolonial process of rethinking thinking is an attempt to disrupt the normalised epistemic dependence on what is regarded as dominant 'Eurocentric thinking' in knowledge production and ways of knowing in education. Ndlovu-Gatsheni further submits that this includes a "process of learning to unlearn in order to re-learn" and the coming to a realisation that "all human being are not only born into a knowledge system but are legitimate knowers and producers of legitimate knowledge" (p. 24).

Following the introductory chapter, there are nine chapters and a concluding chapter in this book. These engage with similar themes that speak to epistemic freedom, such as the onto-decolonial turn, reconstituting the political, re-inventing Africa, the epistemic legitimacy of Africa, education and the university in Africa, and the 2015 South African Fallist student movement under the banner of Rhodes Must Fall. Chapter two examines various decolonial struggles that "emerged from different geo-political sites and different historical periods" (p. 45). These decolonial struggles produced counter-hegemonic political language against slavery, racism, apartheid, gender inequalities and capitalist exploitation. This includes, "Rastafarianism, neo-colonialism, colonization of the mind, underdevelopment, subaltern, Afrocentricity, racial capitalism, radical black tradition, Africana existential tradition, black feminism and black consciousness" (p. 47). Even though these concepts emerged within a specific local historical context, it can be argued that they were, and still are, directed against global coloniality because of its 'connected histories' of colonial conquest. This chapter also engages the concept of empire with its colonial expansionism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni demonstrates how empire took different forms of colonial and imperialist logic and how these different forms also shaped anti-colonial/decolonial struggles. He points out that the first form was 'physical direct violent conquest' which also included land dispossession and exploitation of the colonized. This colonial repression gave birth to many African liberation movements demanding self-determination and independence. The focus of some of these Africanist liberation fighters and African political elites was political decolonization. The second form expressed itself through the 'commercial-military-non-territorial', or the military industrial complex, with an aim to sustain and reproduce the power and influence of the 'former colonizer' in the liberated or independent countries. To protect and entrench its political economic interests, this 'non-territorial' empire with unmatched military

power also took a global responsibility of spreading "peace, human right and democracy" in its former colonies (p. 57). The third form that the empire assumed is the 'metaphysical'. The metaphysical speaks to the mental enslavement of the colonized and instilling a deep sense of inferiority. This continues to sustain "epistemicides and linguicides and alienation" (p. 58).

In Chapter three, *The Onto-Decolonial Turn*, provides a critical overview of the "Cartesian conceptions of the human and knowledge, where human species were socially reorganized, classified and racially hierarchized" (p. 71). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, this Cartesian thinking is the 'root' cause of anguish in our contemporary society. The 'onto-decolonial turn' maintains that it is only through "a radical rethinking" that the notion of "socially classified and racially hierarchized" human relations can be disrupted (p. 72). Furthermore, the onto-decolonial turn is located within a historical context of Eurocentric invention of 'MAN' as the only rational 'maker of the world' (p. 72). The onto-decolonial turn clearly illustrate how the 'triple matrices of ontology, epistemology and pedagogy' are influenced by different forms of oppression and exclusion such as colonialism, race, class, patriarchy, sexism and capitalism. The argument here is that the epistemic struggle for decolonization has to problematise and dismantle all these forms of colonial oppression and the exclusionary propensities emerging from the Euro-North American ways of thinking in institutions of higher learning (p. 72). Drawing on the decolonial work of Silvia Winter (1984, 2001, 2003, 2007) this chapter further adds the need for a "decolonial shift from Man to Human" (p. 74). It is argued that the Euro-American 'invention of Man' brought about 'the othering of Africans, Native Americans, women, the poor and people who were regarded as mentally ill' (p.74). For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the fundamental approach necessary to reverse and disrupt the colonial violence of dismemberment and dehumanization begins with a 'decolonial attitude' (p. 78). The decolonial attitude is "founded on love of humanity…it is the opposite of colonial attitude" in order to bring about a 'new humanism' (p.78-79).

The Euro-North American invention of 'MAN' monopolised the notion of being 'human' and viewed those from the Global South as non-humans with no legitimate knowledge systems. It is, therefore against this backdrop that this chapter suggests "epistemic freedom as the foundation of other freedoms" (p. 80). Ndlovu-Gatsheni posits that it is only when those, who have been denied a place in the community of humanity, with neither history nor knowledge "extricate themselves from epistemic coloniality first", that they can liberate themselves from the "pitfalls of consciousness…and imposed inferiority complexes" (p. 80). Epistemic freedom is seen as a fundamental basis for decolonial consciousness and in attaining the goal of re-humanisation. The process of re-humanization and epistemic freedom is incomplete with a decolonial pedagogy. Here, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) to argue that a decolonial pedagogy is aimed at changing the "hierarchical relations in the teaching and learning domain…it puts the student at the centre of the academic project of the university not as a customer but a co-producer of knowledge" (p.82). The university teacher forms part of this re-humanization; most university teachers are products of 'western style universities' and, if the western-centric curriculum and pedagogical practices are to change, it is important to 're-educate' university teachers from the 'miseducation' that they have been socialised into (p. 84).

Chapter four, *Reconstituting the Political*, echoes a similar approach of re-humanization through reconstituting the political. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that reconstituting the political is "a radical shift from the paradigm of war and the 'will to power' constitutive of coloniality to the 'will to live' and

peace engrained in the decolonial politics" (p. 94). In other words, reconstituting the political brings about a new form of decolonial politics, one of 'humanism' [peace and co-existence] rather than colonial conquest, Othering [based on race], dehumanization, exploitation and epistemicide, culturecide and linguicide. 'Reconstituting of the political' disrupts the colonial construction of the "Manichean structure of zones of being and non-being" (p.94). This chapter also shows the contribution of African nationalists and liberation fighters to 'reconstituting the political' though their political activism; which, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues was informed by a "philosophy of African humanism" (p.94). Ndlovu-Gatsheni clearly illustrates this decolonial 'reconstituting of the political' by focusing on African nationalist leaders such as Patrice Lumumba, Kenneth Kaunda, Amilcar Cabral, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'reconstituting the political' problematizes the Euro-North American conception of the political which has always been philosophically embedded in the notion of war' (p. 94). This Euro-North American conception of the political brought about the "Cartesian notions of 'ego conquiro' (I conquer, therefore I am) [and] 'cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am)" (p.95). It is in this historical context of the "Eurocentric conception of the political that the African anti-colonial archive emerged" (p. 96).

In Chapter five, *Reinventing Africa*, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that 'reinventing Africa' emerges from an existential crisis, where those who have been denied a place in the community of humanity reclaim their "culture, language, history and knowledge" (p.115). He further maintains that "reinventing commences as a decolonial re-membering process in response to centuries of dismemberment and dehumanization" (p. 115). Re-inventing, as a decolonial struggle, cannot be separated from the epistemic freedom which informs and shapes the genuine quest for African "identity formation and intellectual formation" (p. 115). In this chapter, Ndlovu-Gatsheni draws extensively on the work of Ali Mazrui (1978, 1980, 1986) and along with his decolonial input on ways of thinking and higher institutions of learning. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Mazrui tells us that reinventing Africa and Africanity is "the search for an African past that was denied and silenced by imperial/colonial knowledge" (p.117). In addition, this chapter also reflects on Mazrui's 'triple heritage concept' which focuses on three developmental stages of African knowledge, "from oral to written and to electronic" (p. 119). This is understood in relation to 'African identity' that also went through the triple stages of "indogenization, islamification and Westernization" (p. 119). This concept illustrates how this triple heritage shaped African identity formation and African knowledge systems. Moreover, Ndlovu-Gatsheni offers a brief reflection on Mazrui's concept of Afrabia, which critiques African borders particularly the Red Sea that divides Africa from Asia (p. 126). Afrabia proposes a need for "reintegration of Arabia and Africa", which is seen as a way to resolve the 'identity' problem (p. 126).

Chapter six, on the *Epistemic Legitimacy of Africa*, focuses on the relationship between power, knowledge and the ontological question of being. Ndlovu-Gatsheni succinctly argues that European colonial violence not only brought about land dispossession and proletarianisation [turning black land owners into wage labourers] in Africa, but that Africa also lost its 'epistemic legitimacy' when its knowledge was denied and suppressed as a legitimate knowledge system (p. 137). He further argues that the "Hegelian master-servant dialectic of Europe" projects Europe as ordained teachers and 'knowers' while Africans are seen as permanent students that must learn what Europe has to offer as legitimate knowers (p137). Another idea that this chapter suggests is that epistemic struggles must begin with the liberation of the "mental universe of the colonized" in order to reclaim epistemic legitimacy and freedom in Africa (p. 137). In this chapter, Ndlovu-Gatsheni extensively engages with

the work of Mahmood Mamdani (1972; 1973, 1996, 2013, 2015) that grapples with decolonizing African knowledge systems and reclaiming the epistemic legitimacy of Africa. He provides a detailed analysis of Mamdani's work to clearly show how this work contributes to the decolonial archive. The role of African scholars or intellectuals is seen as central to building an "African anti-colonial archive/decolonial archive" that can assert the epistemic legitimacy of Africa (p.141). Ndlovu-Gatsheni locates Mamdani's intellectual contribution within a decolonial school of thought that transcends one-dimensional economic categorizations. He further maintains that Mamdani's intellectual contributions are shaped by "historization of African issues" and the search for a 'political alternative' that can only be found within the African continent (p.140). For Mamdani, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, it is important for Africa to develop its own theories and philosophical reasoning in grappling with its own contextual problems. This chapter concludes by reflecting on Mamdani's recent work on transitional justice in Africa, where he argues that it is important to draw a clear distinction between political and criminal violence. He further proposes that genuine transitional justice should not only focus on the perpetrators, but should also find a way to resolve deep-seated structural trappings that contribute to violence.

Chapter seven, *Education/University in Africa*, demonstrates how modern institutions of higher learning in Africa were part of the colonizer's narrative and a potent instrument to reproduce a 'western' way of thinking and being. Ndlovu-Gatsheni tells us that these 'westernized' universities in Africa provided an intellectual community to imperial and colonial powers, in other words, these universities conducted research that supported the colonial and racist logic to carry out "egenocides, ontolocides, epistemides, cultureside" (p. 161). It is through these universities that 'Eurocentrism' was normalised and internalised as a way of life. Here, Ndlovu-Gatsheni clearly illustrates how universities in Africa contributed to the dismemberment and dehumanisation of African people and the rejection of their legitimate knowledge systems. Hence, decolonization of higher education institutions is central to realising epistemic freedom (p. 161). This chapter also reflects on pre-colonial genealogies of education in Africa. Drawing on the work of Oyeronke Oyewumi (2016) , Ndlovu-Gatsheni shows how the mother was a primary teacher in the African indigenous education system (p. 163). He further argues that this also included "specialised teachers in pre-colonial Africa, including priests, divines, kings, chiefs, poets, griots (story tellers), rainmakers and merchants who were regarded as traditional intellectuals" (p. 164). This chapter provides a historical account of pre-colonial African indigenous education and how the rise of colonial, modern, western universities contributed to the destruction of African ways of thinking and knowing. Moreover, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, maintains that even universities that emerged post-independence are still grappling with the question how to transform/Africanise the universities that they inherited from the colonial regime, in order to build what could be considered an African university. He also touches on how the corporatization and commodification of knowledge has also contributed to the struggle for a decolonial African university.

In chapter eight, *National Question*, Ndlovu-Gatsheni speaks to the historical development of the national question. To define the national question, Ndlovu-Gatsheni draws on Jacob Ade Ajayi (2000) who defines the "national question as a 'perennial debate' about how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural groupings so that they have the same rights and privileges, access to power and equitable share of natural resources" (p. 199). Ndlovu-Gatsheni locates this question within the history of colonialism, modernity, decolonization and post-colonialism. He further suggests that the national question has to be understood within the context of five interrelated

discursive and historical contexts: (1) the colonial context that labelled Africans as native; (2) the nationalist anti-colonial struggle for independence and self-determination; (3) the post-colonial period that grappled with how to build the notion of nation-building; (4) the post-nationalism characterised by struggle and activism for a transparent and accountable government that can bring about economic equality, free and quality education and social justice; and (5) human right discourse (p. 199). Ndlovu-Gatsheni states that these different historical contexts enable one to understand the dynamics and nuances of the national question and how Africans have grappled with it. This chapter also touches on the contribution of Neville Alexander (1979) to the national question regarding his attempts to reconcile the conflicting ideas on what a post-apartheid South African should look like. Finally, this chapter reflects on the idea of South Africa as a nation and its liberal geneology and Africanist imaginations.

In Chapter 9, the focus shifts to the *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) student movement that emerged in 2015 in the South African higher education system. Ndlovu-Gatsheni first provides the historical context within which to locate and understand contemporary African protest movements such as RMF. The argument advanced in this chapter is that RMF was part of the "decolonial struggles of the twenty-first century" (p. 222). Ndlovu-Gatsheni shows the ideological and philosophical intersectionality of radical black feminism, black consciousness, Fanonianism and Pan-Africanism which was embraced by the student movement to advocate a decolonial turn. It is further suggested that, through adopting this intersectional decolonial outlook, the student movement was able to transcend the economistic, one-dimensional class analysis and to thus re-interpret and understand the struggles of students within the South African higher education system. RMF is seen as a decolonial student movement that called for an epistemological alternative of Africa-centred knowledge. Africa-centred knowledge is seen as a decolonial epistemic project for Africa to find its own solutions to the problems that it is grappling with rather than being informed by a "framework of received theory" from Euro-North-America, which is divorced from the realities of the continent (p. 225). This 'received theory' is attributed to the limitations of Marxist and liberal traditions that do not clearly locate African protest movements within their own historical contexts of struggle. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the university becomes a site of struggle for RMF, because of the colonial and apartheid philosophical foundations of universities in Africa and South Africa specifically. The Fallist decolonial movement should be understood within the historical context of black students rejecting the colonial ways of being and thinking that are still deeply embedded in South African universities. He concludes by problematizing the transformation discourse in the post-1994 higher education system, arguing that it was informed by a neoliberal framework that did not disrupt structural inequalities.

The book concludes with a critical reflection on *African Futures* from a decolonial perspective. Ndlovu-Gatsheni illustrates how European colonization in Africa not only rejected Africans as human beings, dispossessed them of their land, exploited them, and dismantled their legitimate knowledge systems and ways of knowing and being in the world, but it also colonized and monopolized the concept of time (p. 243). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, to Euro-modernity "time became bifurcated into two, the pre-modern and modern" (p. 243). This bifurcation then further categorized Africans and the rest of the colonized peoples as "indigenous, tribe, primitive, backward, native and black" while it regarded European people as modern and civilized (p. 243). These categorizations permanently trapped African people in the past while it located European peoples in the future. In addition, Ndlovu-Gatsheni maintains that at the centre of decolonial epistemic freedom in Africa is the ontological question of

"what it means to be human" (p. 243). Here, he paints a clear picture: the ontological question of being should not be understood in abstraction from the epistemological question of knowledge, because the rejection of Africans as human beings also meant rejecting their valid/legitimate knowledge systems and their own ways of thinking and knowing. Global coloniality and its colonization of time and categorization of Africans and other colonized peoples assumes that Africans are incapable of determining their own economic, social and political futures. Decolonial struggles are born out of this dismemberment and dehumanization of Africans; and how their contribution to human history continues to be obliterated to sustain unequal global power structures. Ndlovu-Gatsheni concludes by suggesting that decolonization is aimed at "placing the future into the hands of African people as drivers and dynamic forces operating within the global arena. Pan-Africanism then emerges as that decolonial ideological glue framework for unity, self-reliance, integration, and solidarity which embraces the African Diaspora" (p. 245).

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