

LOCAL SOCIOLOGIES TOWARDS EPISTEMIC DECOLONISATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Mogomme A. Masoga

Abstract

Epistemic decolonisation refers to the decolonisation of the knowledge configurations of the colonial subject. Many Africanist scholars have deliberated on the decolonisation of education in (South) Africa (Bewaji, 2012, 2016; Mbembe 2015; Taiwo 2022; Masoga and Shokane 2023). Despite these efforts, benign forms of apartheid and quasi-colonialism in South Africa continue to thrive through different, but relatively hegemonic forms known as neo-colonialism. Many scholars from the global South have ruffled the feathers of the hegemonic colonial system by thrusting disruptive monumental sociological models into the academy, focusing on matters that were hitherto under the radar of epistemological analysis. This paper employs an epistemologically grounded social research method, with a phenomenological design as an approach, to tease out critical issues in the argument for the urgency of epistemic decolonisation in Africa.

Keywords: Apartheid, colonialism, epistemic decolonisation, social research method, sociology, South Africa.

Introduction

There are two manifestos (meanings) implicated by the phrase “local sociologies”. The first manifesto refers to demythologizing Western sociologies towards promoting African sociologies. The second manifesto concerns South African sociologies that constitutes the crux of the present conversation on epistemic decolonization. The focus of this paper is the exploration of South

African sociologies that not only critique but also sought to decolonize the basis on which western education system thrives in (South) Africa to continue to entrench false narratives of western knowledge hegemony in subaltern and colonized communities.

Before discussing the proliferation of local sociologies, let us commence by exploring the rise of sociology as a discipline.

Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014, 18) maintain that:

At least as important as political revolution in shaping sociological theory was the Industrial Revolution, which swept through many Western societies, mainly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Industrial Revolution was not a single event but many interrelated developments that culminated in the transformation of the Western world from a largely agricultural to an overwhelmingly industrial system. Large numbers of people left farms and agricultural work for the industrial occupations offered in the burgeoning factories. The factories themselves were transformed by a long series of technological improvements. Large economic bureaucracies arose to provide the many services needed by industry and the emerging capitalist economic system. In this economy, the ideal was a free marketplace where the many products of an industrial system could be exchanged. Within this system, a few profited greatly while the majority worked long hours for low wages. A reaction against the industrial system and against capitalism in general followed and led to the labor movement as well as to various radical movements aimed at overthrowing the capitalist system.

Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014, 35) further remarked:

The Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and the reaction against them all involved an enormous

upheaval in Western society, an upheaval that affected sociologists greatly. Four major figures in the early history of sociological theory—Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel—were preoccupied, as were many lesser thinkers, with these changes and the problems they created for society as a whole. They spent their lives studying these problems, and in many cases they endeavored to develop programs that would help solve them.

Though not known as a renowned sociologist, Rugwiji (2019, 1) writes that: “The continent of Africa is not only characterised by poverty, but also plagued by socio-political crises and human rights abuses which further exacerbate poverty”. Randy Moore and Carl Chung opined that: “The death, in late 1999, of civil-rights activist Daisy Bates reminded people of one of the pivotal events in blacks’ struggle for social equality: the integration of public schools” (2005, 1). Hence, the new narrative which is being advocated in this essay would be concerned with Africa’s “contemporary social and political reality and must explain Africa to Africans” (Currey 2008, 52). Achebe had also supported this move by the writers of the second generation with the statement he made while giving a talk at a Political Science Seminar at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, that: “It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames” (Achebe, 1977, 78). Awuzie (2018, 12) concurs with Achebe, and he says: “There is a way an African writer can capture the African social and leadership challenges and still retain his nostalgic feeling about the continent which in most cases can be ‘infectious’”. According to Ocheni and Nwankwo, “The colonization of Africa by European powers was necessitated by

several factors. Notable, among the factors was the emergence of the industrial revolution which brought about a rapid change in the socio-economic transformation and technology of the European countries” (2012, 47). Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012, 48–49) explained how “The various African states or territories were conquered politically, economically, culturally, socially and enslaved.” Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012, 52) further mourned how colonialism “brought about disarticulation in the provision of social amenities and the urbanization pattern in Africa...”

It is interesting that Ocheni and Nwankwo would consider the destruction of African humanity as being a necessity, given the fact that this is not the only instance in human history where one society had conquered another or colonized a “weaker”. What they fail to be cognizant of is the deliberate reification of falsehood in all aspects of knowledge production while destroying the traditional ontologies and epistemologies of societies targeted for expropriation in the name of bogus science and reason. Linking sociology to epistemology, Stacey (2004, 142) opines that: “Under contemporary conditions of globalized, market-driven communication technologies and neoconservative discursive frames, to engage in public sociology is to reinforce positivist hegemony, whatever your epistemological convictions.” Nevertheless, Beach’s (2013, 92) study is also relevant for asserting that: “Durkheim and Parsons seemed to solidify a sociology that left no room for individual volition.” This could not have been by accident, as the hegemonism they propagated were necessary instruments in the subjugation of societies of other climes outside of Europe. These characters, Durkheim and Parsons, were the equivalents of Hegel and Hobbes in History and Political Science (Political Philosophy) – they were the intellectual authorities used by Europe to destroy the traditions of knowledge production and application of other societies outside of Europe.

Although Dubos’ (Beach (2013, 100) study appears much older than Beach’s, the former still finds patriotism in the latter to affirm that: “To fully understand human beings, one has to focus

primarily on the ‘sociocultural environment’, using theories and methodologies appropriate to that level of reality.” One would also be mindful to agree with Mills (2000, 77) who contended that: “Whatever else he may be, man is a social and an historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures.” Bourdieu (Beach, 2013, 19) had described such a process as “the art of living.” I like Dennett’s perspective, when he talks of “epistemically hungry seekers of information” (2003, 64), which help in the transformation of reality, especially social reality. One thing which these writers often do not realize is the manner in which they privilege male understanding and knowledge of reality, thereby disavowing the epistemic status of half of humanity in their fixation of fictive “man” (Code 1992).

As Nwosimiri (2022, 78) further noted: “It would be reasonable to speak of an epistemology by considering its socio-cultural contexts.” Talking of socio-cultural context, as Nwosimiri puts it, Ajani and Gamede (2021, 121) admit that: “South African higher education curriculum has predominantly been Eurocentric and epistemic, reflecting Western dominance in post-apartheid South Africa.” Mheta et al (Ajani & Gamede, 2021, 122) critiques the South African higher education system, which they maintain “deserves to be dismantled of the Eurocentric epistemologies that framed teacher education.” Their assertion is followed up by Connell’s (2018, 4399–4407) analysis, which echoes the need of “decolonizing sociology.” Rudwick and Makoni (2021, 262) do not rest their case differently when they talk about sociology of language which they think “can from our perspective, reclaim its rightful place in an ethical and decolonised process of knowledge construction.” Meanwhile, the Ubuntu concept is revisited by Le Grange (Ajani and Gamede, 2021, 126) who also claims that: “Decolonising teacher education entails liberation of the present curriculum that is epistemic into a fusion of both *Ubuntu* (I am because we are) and the active force of *currere* into the oneness of decolonised minds.” Different African

peoples have diverse ways of doing things; they cannot and do not want to be coerced into uniformity, either with respect to how they understand and utilize time or any other ontological or epistemic category for that matter. Any effort to impose a uniform socio-epistemic paradigm would be farcical and flawed.

Local (South) African sociologies

By “local sociologies” reference is made to (South) African sociology activism and scientific arguments engineered to challenge the orthodoxies paraded in the west as case study, representing global African situation in the knowledge production in the field of sociology as well as other disciplines which were claimed to have no African historical antecedents. Hendricks (2006, 86), one of the South African local sociologists, reveals that: “Sociology played a critical role in rewriting South African history and in recasting approaches of complex and ever-changing reality.” In this regard, what he was alluding to is the ways in which scholarship was deployed to deny African agency and capacity of indigenous peoples of South Africa to have patrimony with the lands of their ancestors. Even more problematic was the impositions of onerous conditions of land affinity, which thereby facilitated the dispossession of Africans of their ancestral lands. Du Plessis (2021, 55) also acknowledges that: “There is a need for education leadership to develop outside of Western influence.” This is a huge challenge, which needs to be pursued in all aspects of the educational processes, systems and practices, especially those that relate to the understanding of human society and culture in South Africa. Curiously, most of the traditions of Africans, which were described as primitive earlier in western academy are not being embraced and refashioned into “scientific” practices, thereby belying the fraudulent initial vilification of such social and cultural traditions.

Biko envisaged a “joint culture” for South Africa: “Sure it [the joint culture] will have European experience because we have whites here who are descended from Europe. We don’t dispute that.

But for God's sake it must have African experience as well" (2004, 148). The exasperation of Steve Bantu Biko here is understandable even though it grants too much to the colonial impostor. It would seem as if his remonstrations have not been taken on board enough, as South African universities still "remain overwhelmingly white even as the structure of South Africa's politics has completely transformed" (Worger, 2014, 211). In another observation, Biko says:

We must rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes who formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders. More must be revealed, and stress must be laid on the successful nation building attempts of men such as Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Hintsa. These areas call for intense research to provide some sorely needed missing links. We would be too naïve to allow our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us, but we have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652, the year van Riebeeck landed at the Cape (Biko, 2004, 70).

Biko further writes, "a country in Africa, in which most people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style" (2004, 26); and there would be no doubt that leaders in such societies must have attended to continuous engagement with and understanding of the various elements which make such a society function harmoniously beyond purely academic interest. Our interest in engaging more of Steve Biko led us to include in this study more of his views than just a matter of curiosity, as is further shown in the following passage:

One must quickly add that the moral of the story is not that therefore we must castigate white society and its newspapers ... the real moral of the story is that we blacks must on our own develop those agencies that we need, and not look up to

unsympathetic and often hostile quarters to offer these to us (Biko, 1972, 7–8).

Today one could say that there is some improvement in this in proportional terms, considering apparent data. However, to what extent has the knowledges been transformed from the colonial, apartheid and racist curricular? If the answer to this question is “to a negligible extent”, then it would mean that regardless of how many African scholars and professors parade the corridors of the universities, there would be little transformation of society from colonial, apartheid or racist one to an inclusive, truly free or necessarily Afrocentric one that is expected.

The concept of epistemic decolonisation

“Epistemic decolonization” is a concept of revolutionizes and critique the local knowledge (i.e., education system in South Africa) or lack thereof which is currently premised on colonial appendages, to pay careful attention to the diverse issues involved in the educational systems and practices as sites of social engineering and knowledge production. Boswell and Nyamnjoh’s (2017, 167–168) analysis is also in order as a starting point. They say,

A decolonisation of anthropology will be possible only if we carry out a rehistoricisation; rethinking, reworking and reassessing theory; rethinking disciplinarily; pursuing social responsible ethics and politics of ethnographic research; mapping the local and supralocal spheres; interrogating the organisation of anthropology; mobilizing anthropology for a democratic engagement by linking it to public interests; and finally decentering Western dominance.

The above view petitions a response to the following question: “... Are there ways in which knowledge might be decolonized?” (Wood 2020). The response to the above question is

positive because there are several ways to decolonize knowledge. For example, Lockett (Du Plessis 2021, 57) writes that: “Decolonising theories and documents on social injustice, gives voice to subjugated knowledge, creates space for the voices of the silenced to be expressed and listened to, and challenges racism, colonialism and oppression.” What is often absent is the critical interest in using indigenous or domestic theoretical tropes to create new and more suitable knowledge beyond the confines of what the academies emplaced by western hegemony can provide. Another means of decolonising knowledge, according to Waghid (Du Plessis 2021, 65), is to affirm that “Decolonisation is not merely a matter of political independence,” it must transcend into the educational, social engineering, spiritual and all strata of African existence. . The critical nexus between sociology, education, epistemology, African humanity, and decolonisation is demythologizing the colonial mindset.

Conclusion

This paper deliberately reverberates through the narrower thrust of western practice of sociology in order to establish the relevance and applicability of such contributions for the local people. It argues that decolonisation was not just a matter of political independence alone, it includes an epistemic decolonisation which involves the demythologization of the colonial mindset on the side of both the colonizer and the colonized as both sets of human beings have been trapped in the cauldron of mutually antagonistic no win situation unless careful disarticulation of the patently destructive system is undertaken.

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Professor Mogomme A. Masoga is of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.