

Bridging the Epistemological, Structural and Normative in Knowledge Production:

How Euro-centrism is Systemically Preserved and Can Be Subverted

Dr Romina Istratii
SOAS University of London

My personal journey and positionality



Open Conversations



1st Joint PhD Symposium of the SOAS Research Students' Association (RSA) & The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR)

Decolonisation in Praxis

Thursday 07 June 2018, 10am-2pm
SOAS, Wolfson Lecture Theatre (SWLT)
Senate House, First Floor (S108)

Decolonising the academic curriculum is a salient discourse in our days in British universities. The School of Oriental and African Studies, an institution that started as a colonial project in 1916, has been steadily moving in this direction, with students increasingly requesting a re-evaluation of curricula that have favoured a single knowledge centre and portrayed a certain (western) epistemology or viewpoint of the world as normative. All this converges to an effort to open up knowledge-making to different epistemologies, normative standards and representations, which fit better an institution specialising in African and Oriental studies. Colonialism in our times continues



Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions

Conversation Event Report
SOAS University of London,
18th September 2019



Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Practices and Norms Event at SOAS, Sep 2019

Renewed attention to decolonisation, extensive work at SOAS and the UK to decolonise curricula, pedagogy and admission standards in higher education institutions – less attention given to research development structures and norms

Concerns at SOAS about the changing funding landscape and the role of research offices in research development practices, especially in relation to emerging schemes that fund research related to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA)

The conversation event included 13 presentations by researchers, academics, practitioners, funders and research office directors from the health and social sciences in the UK and internationally (speakers from Namibia, Ethiopia and Nepal)

I would like to echo Gloria Ladson-Billings' understanding that “[e]pistemology is ultimately linked to worldview.” (2005, 258). Individuals are always ‘epistemologically situated’, which means that their worldview influences their conceptual, theoretical and analytical framework.

Historically, the Western European colonisers projected their worldviews, interests and understandings of humanity onto the ‘other.’ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o referring to colonialism wrote:

...its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. (1986, 16).

In contemporary times, lack of recognition about the epistemological situatedness of historical paradigms and limited reflexivity about personal positionality in research and knowledge production means that western assumptions continue to be transposed cross-culturally and to dictate knowledge paradigms.

Key epistemological issues in knowledge production

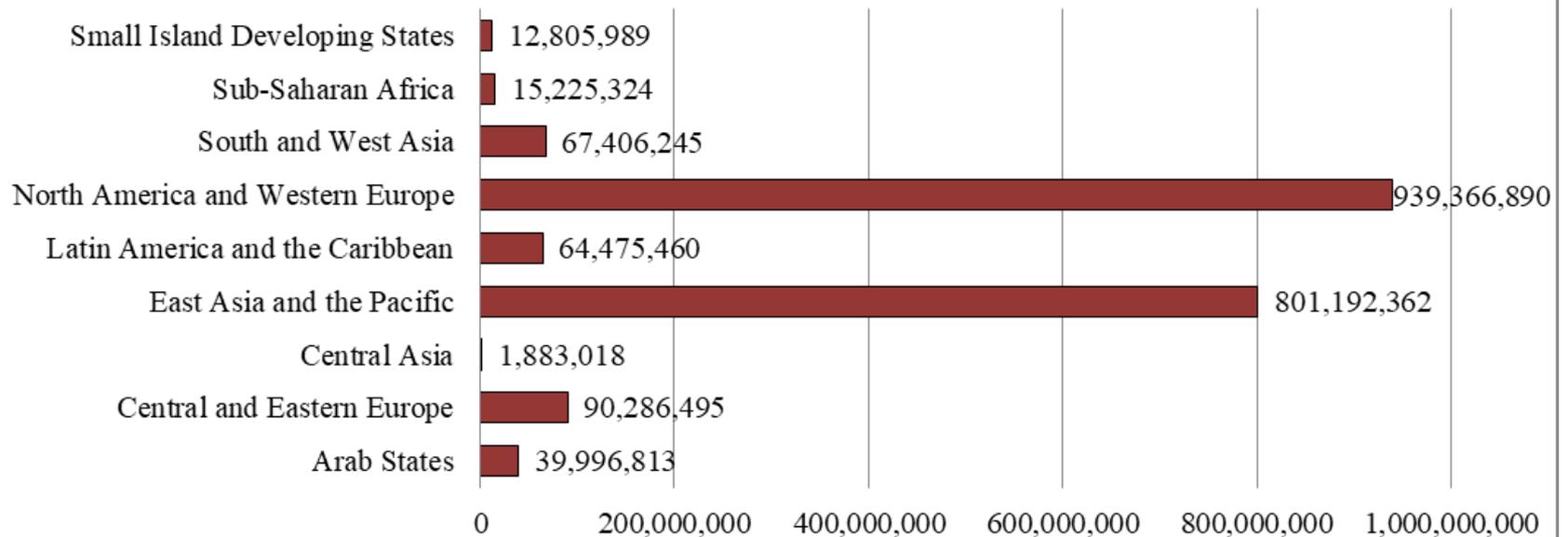
- Disconnect between theory and practice and between researcher/academic and communities/the wider public
- Dominance of English language in both teaching and published research – favours Anglophone standards of knowledge production (language and epistemology are interlinked)
- Euro-centric standards of knowledge validation, research excellence and impact: politics of citation, peer review norms and modes/forms of knowledge sharing

Structural, normative and regulatory framework

- Political and ideological agendas, financial constraints and regulatory framework in UK HE (e.g. Industrial Strategy, Higher Education Research Act 2017, Research Excellence Framework, etc.)
- Research funding climate, funding priorities and governance (e.g. data management laws, due diligence, etc.)
- Geographical distribution of publishing houses and established publication norms (e.g. peer review, metrics, etc.)

- R&D funding is disproportionately available, with higher Gross Domestic Expenditure (GERD) percentages in North America and Western Europe (slide 8)
- Share of global R&D accounted for by Asia, Latin America and Africa increased since the 1970s, but without significant reduction in global inequalities (Arond and Bell 2009, 23)
- Increasingly research grants focused on specific countries and of larger scale (Blotch and Sørensen, 2015)
 - e.g. UK ODA-related GCRF and Newton Funds on DAC-listed countries, research centres/networks
- Research funding increasingly ‘institutionalised’ – institutions must mediate bid development and manage and disburse larger grants

Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D in '000 current PPP\$, 2016



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

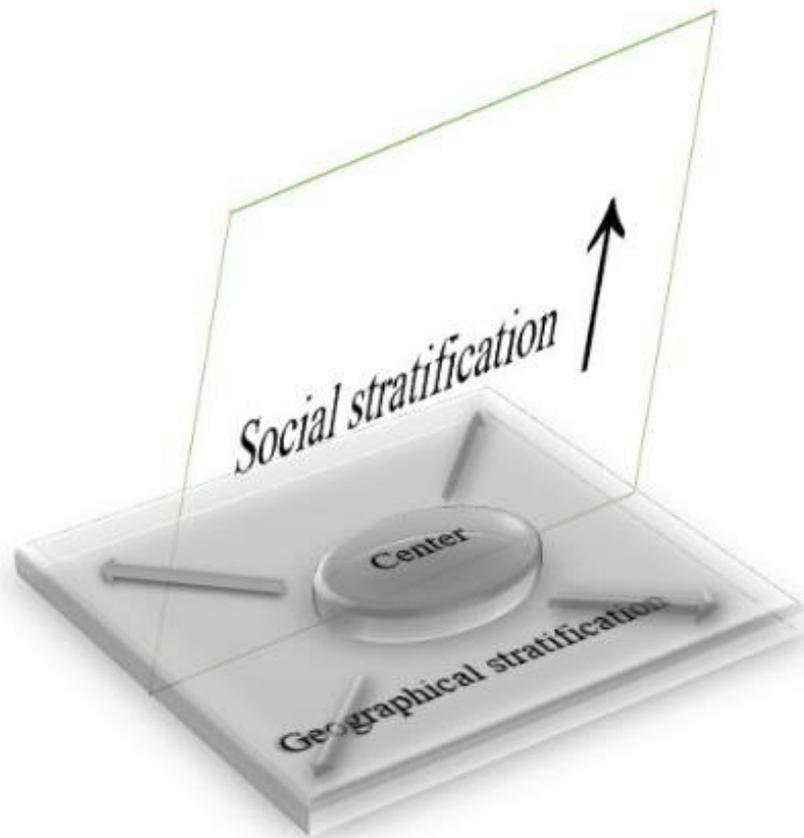
Select international-looking UK funding opportunities and Principal Investigator location requirements

<p>The British Academy Global Professorships</p>	<p>Senior scholars active in any discipline within the social sciences and the humanities and based in any country overseas with the opportunity to relocate for a period of four years to the UK and make a contribution to UK research and higher education.</p>
<p>Newton Fund International Fellowships</p>	<p>The scheme provides the opportunity for the best early stage post-doctoral researchers from all over the world to work at UK research institutions for a period of two years.</p>
<p>Newton Advanced Fellowships</p>	<p>This award is currently available to international early career group leaders to develop their research by linking them with some of the best research groups in the UK</p>
<p>Newton Mobility Grants</p>	<p>This award is currently available to international researchers that want to strengthen the research and innovation capacity by visiting or sending staff and students to the UK.</p>
<p>GCRF Network Plus</p>	<p>A group of international academic networks led by UK-based universities set up to conduct collaborative arts and humanities-based research into some of the world's most pressing development challenges. Applications are welcomed from UK Higher Education Institutions, or UKRI-accredited Independent Research Organisations. Applicants should ensure they meet the general UKRI eligibility criteria for Investigators as set-out in the AHRC's Funding Guide. International Co-Investigators are eligible for funding through this call in accordance with AHRC's international Co-Investigator policy.</p>
<p>GCRF Thematic Calls</p>	<p>Most of these seem to require principal investigators to be based at an eligible UK research organisation.</p>
<p>GCRF Research Hubs</p>	<p>The guidelines stipulate that the PI/Hub Director should act as the figurehead for the Hub, and must be employed by the lead organisation and the term of employment must extend beyond the duration of the proposed Hub. The F&Q section specifies that "there are no fixed requirements with regards to the management or leadership structures for each Hub as we appreciate that this is likely to vary depending on the specific requirement of each Hub." However, all current Hub-Directors listed in the official booklet are UK-based.</p>
<p>GCRF Global Engagement Networks</p>	<p>The Network Director (Principal Investigator) for each Network must be an academic based at an eligible research organisation in a country on the OECD DAC list.</p>

Core-periphery structure of global academic capital

More than 75 percent of social science articles ever published in periodicals indexed in the Web of Science's SSCI list by North American or Western European authors. Less than 10 percent by authors in Africa, Latin-America, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Geographical location/language of publishing houses, peer review standards and scientometrics important contributing factors



Source: Demeter (2019)

Implications for African research and researchers/ academics

- Funding calls' increasing focus on 'global challenges' may not cohere with or reflect local priorities or may draw attention away from other urgent matters
- Many African universities structured around the western model: assessment-based, productivity-based, evaluation-based (Achille Mbembe, 2016), while facing capacity limitations and having no protected time for research (Prof. Alex Kanyimba)
- Local researchers incentivised to be part of international research projects in which they are disfavoured or treated only as 'data collectors' – the epistemological and theoretical framework remains Eurocentric
- Tight deadlines and funding structures conducive to instrumentalist collaborations – tend to favour prominent institutions in local countries, marginalising rural, regional institutes and non-academic institutes
- Local researchers often engage in subcontracted or consultancy work that can be disadvantaging, especially in relation to attribution, copyright and publication rights

- Knowledge-sharing tends to be mono-directional with western European researchers dominating discussions and setting the agenda
- Neglect of local knowledge systems, ontologies, methodologies and axiological differences (Prof. Alex Kanyimba)
- Lack of linguistic training and cultural sensitivity and disheartenment of local collaborators
- Limited commitment to substantive capacity-building in the context of research projects, endangering continuity and sustainability (Dr Mulugeta Berihu)
- Local researchers constrained in their ability to publish and to have local impact due to funder or research partner data use and publishing restrictions (Dr Seira Tamang)

Some practical suggestions forward

- Funders can consider how to accommodate multi-vocal narratives in the conceptualisation of calls and engage local researchers of diverse backgrounds in the peer review of international research projects
- Subcontracting and consultancies within and alongside HE need to be regulated (e.g. funders restricting possibilities of subcontracting research services, unless it can be ascertained that subcontractors are credited and have shared IP of work)
- Research development offices and staff in Europe can liaise with their counterparts in African institutions and provide research development support as needed and obtain insight into the conditions of local researchers to adapt better to their needs and constraints
- HEIs in Europe can provide different incentives to their academics to encourage reflexive research development (e.g. by awarding transparent budget development practices or language training)
- More collaborative ethical and peer review processes could be instituted between European and African partner institutions for relevant project applications

More fundamental questions that need to be asked

- Conceptualisations of knowledge and whether and how different understandings can be accommodated in institutionalised research and knowledge production
- The standards of excellent research and what makes a good researcher/academic (level of reflexivity and personal ethic versus qualifications and publications)
- The role of language in research practice and how multilingualism can be structurally accommodated in research development processes and international collaborative research

Structural-Normative-Transboundary: “Decolonizing an African university requires a geographical imagination that extends well beyond the confines of the nation-state.” (Mbembe, 2016: 36)

Embodied and Practical: It is important to act upon the values of decolonisation that so many advocates in Africa and elsewhere have stressed and to embody an attitude of humility and openness in our engagements with diverse interlocutors and different epistemological and experiential realms (Istratii, Hirmer and Lim, 2018)

If this ethos is embodied throughout, structures and norms will start to reflect it.

- Achille Joseph Mbembe. 2016. Decolonizing the University: New Directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15(1): 29-45.
- Arond, Elisa and Bell, Martin. 2009. *Trends in the Global Distribution of R&D since the 1970s: Data, their Interpretation and Limitations*. STEPS Centre.
- Blotch, Carter and Sørensen, Mads. 2015. The Size of Research Funding: Trends and Implications. *Science and Public Policy* 22(1): 30-43.
- Demeter, Márton. 2019. The World-Systemic Dynamics of Knowledge Production: The Distribution of Transnational Academic Capital in Social Sciences. *Journal of World-System Research* 25(1): 111-144.
- Gloria Ladson-Billings. 2000. Racialised Discourses and Ethnic Epistemologies. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research. Second Edition..* California, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 257-277.
- Istratii, Romina and Lewis, Alex. 2019. *Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions: Conversation Event Report*. SOAS University of London: Research and Enterprise Directorate.
- Istratii, Romina and Hirmer, Monika and Lim, Iris, (eds.). 2018. Decolonisation in Praxis. *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* 11, SOAS University of London.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: JamesCurry.