



The Politics and Economics of Knowledge Production: Crucial Aspects of the Struggle Against Western Imperialism

By Reginald M.J. Oduor



What is knowledge? Is knowledge as objective as mountains, valleys, oceans, lakes and rivers, or is what constitutes knowledge determined by culture? We usually presume that knowledge has to do with understanding the world as it *is* rather than as we might *imagine* it to be. Many of us assume that the more academic certificates one has, the more knowledge one possesses. Yet scholars now point out that knowledge can only be properly understood if we consider insights from a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, psychology, economics, politics and philosophy, among others. In ancient Athens, “politics” was understood as the management of the affairs of the city-state (*polis*). However, in line with the thought of [Niccolò Machiavelli](#), many now understand politics as the activities of acquiring and retaining coercive power, and it is in this latter sense that I speak here of the politics of knowledge production. “Economics” comes from the Greek words *oikos* (“household”) and *nomos* (“law”, “management” or “principle”), literally “the law, management or principle of the household”, but has come to refer to the management of a society’s resources.

Knowledge production directed by politics and economics

As I pointed out in [“Concrete Data and Abstract Notions in the Philosophical Study of Indigenous](#)

[African Thought](#)", knowledge production is an integral part of social processes, and therefore necessarily laden with social, moral, political, and, most importantly, economic considerations. As the late Nigerian social scientist Claude Ake observed in [Social Science as Imperialism](#), science in any society is apt to be geared to the interests and impregnated with the values of the ruling class that ultimately controls the conditions under which it is produced and consumed by financing research, setting national priorities, controlling the education system and the mass media, and in other ways. Thus, the choices of subject matter and methodology are heavily influenced by priorities identified in specific economic, social and political contexts: this set of dynamic interactions with economics as its foundation is what the late Egyptian economist, [Samir Amin](#), following Karl Marx, referred to as "political economy".

Besides, the transmission of knowledge reflects a society's economic structures. In [The Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), Paulo Freire memorably highlights the distinction between "banking education", in which the learner is a docile and passive recipient of knowledge from the teacher, and which therefore reflects the capitalist power hierarchy, and "problem-solving education" entailing a dialogical approach in which both "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" teach and learn. Tragically but not surprisingly, six decades after formal independence, most schools and universities in Africa continue to deploy banking education in line with the capitalist power relations characteristic of the societies in which they function.

To illustrate the point that the production and transmission of knowledge are greatly influenced by politics, Leonhard Praeg, in [A Report on Ubuntu](#), presents a hypothetical conversation between a South African philosophy professor of European descent and a young African postgraduate law student who is considering registering for a second master's degree in philosophy. At one point, she challenges the professor's presentation of philosophy as an objective and universal enterprise by highlighting the fact that the choice of who to include in any philosophical discourse is itself a political one:

Well, it seems obvious to me . . . that the most fundamental starting point for any philosophical conversation should be questioning the mechanisms that decide who is included and who is excluded from that conversation and whose traditions of thought will or will not be invoked in that conversation. Perhaps the most fundamental questions, the questions that every conversation should start with are political, questions such as: How is the difference between the included and excluded legitimized and what kind of institutional arrangements exist to safeguard and perpetuate certain kinds of knowledge at the exclusion of others?

Colonial devastation of indigenous systems of knowledge

In [The Invention of Africa](#), the Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe explains that colonialism and colonization basically mean "organization", "arrangement". The two words derive from the Latin word *colere*, meaning to cultivate or to design." He goes on to point out that the Western colonisers organized and transformed non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs:

[I]t is possible to use three main keys to account for the modulations and methods representative of colonial organization: the procedures of acquiring, distributing, and exploiting lands in colonies; the policies of domesticating natives; and the manner of managing ancient organizations and implementing new modes of production. Thus, three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of natives' minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective. These complementary projects constitute what might be called the colonizing structure, which completely embraces the physical, human, and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience.

Indeed, the Western imperialists only left their colonies in Africa and elsewhere after putting in place numerous structures to ensure their ongoing, albeit covert, control of the economies of the said territories. For example, in the late 1930s France created the [CFA Franc Zone](#), comprising 14 West and Central African countries as well as the Comoros, bound by a monetary cooperation policy ostensibly to ensure the financial stability of its members, all of who used one or other of the two versions of the CFA Franc as their currency. Both CFA Francs have a fixed exchange rate to the euro —real evidence of what I would refer to as “chains that bind”. Similarly, in the 1950s, the Swynnerton Plan in Kenya sought to mitigate the unpopularity of the British colonial regime by creating an African land-owning petty middle class that would be driven by an imperative to protect its property, and thereby view itself as having shared interests with the European settlers after the country’s independence.

Furthermore, the Western imperialists “left” only after ensuring that their former colonies adopted liberal democratic constitutions based on individualist capitalist values rather than on the communalistic outlooks of the peoples of Africa. They also ensured that the colonial territories embraced Western legal systems. For example, on 12th August 1897, the British invaders declared what they called The Reception Date, referring to the decree that the English statutes of general application passed before 12th August 1897 are law in Kenya, unless a Kenyan statute, or a latter English statute made applicable in Kenya, has repealed any such statute. In short, the British invaders declared the legal systems of the peoples of present day Kenya null and void, or, at best, relegated them to the status of “customary law” presumed to be inferior to the British legal system. This situation still holds to date, as evident in the way in which advocates and judges in Kenya frequently refer to English law, but very rarely to the jurisprudence of Kenya’s various peoples. No wonder “customary law” remains a highly marginalised area of study in most universities in Africa decades after independence.

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Similarly, the colonisers demeaned the diverse intellectual inventions and innovations of the peoples of Africa in areas such as medicine, environmental conservation, culinary arts, and creative works (such as songs, poems, fables and legends) among others. For example, they used the paradoxical and pejorative term “witch-doctor” to refer to indigenous healers, thereby deliberately conflating the restorative roles of healers with the destructive acts of wizards and witches. Indeed, due to that outrageous deliberate colonial conflation, most Kiswahili speakers in Kenya now do not appreciate the distinction between *mganga* (“healer”) and *mchawi* (“witch/wizard”), thereby failing to appreciate that even a medical doctor trained in a Western-type medical school is a *mganga*, and only refers to him or her as *daktari* from the English word “doctor”. No wonder it has been so easy to convince most people in Africa that their own indigenous systems of medical care are utterly hopeless in the face of COVID-19, or that any innovations they might develop to manage the scourge must be validated in Geneva, Washington DC or elsewhere outside the continent or under the direction of institutions based outside the continent.

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establishments therefore systematically downgraded indigenous languages, referring to them as “vernaculars”—a term used to denote languages spoken by “uncivilised” communities and contrasted with “literary” or “cultured” languages. Thus, the typical child in Africa undergoes instruction at school using English, French, Portuguese or German, thereby losing his or her cultural grounding through the lack of proficiency in his or her mother tongue; and it is much worse than that, for he or she begins to disparage indigenous languages. Many of us have heard the claim by our compatriots that the languages of the peoples of Africa are incapable of mediating scholarly discourses. This claim is oblivious to, or deliberately ignores, the fact that the Western languages with which many associate academic discourses have acquired their proficiency in scholarship only because of borrowing heavily from a variety of languages, and nothing, except a colonised mentality, prevents speakers of the indigenous languages of Africa from enriching them in similar fashion.

Unshackling contemporary scholarship in Africa from Western hegemony

In [The Invention of Africa](#), V.Y. Mudimbe is particularly unhappy that, long after political independence, African studies continue to be conducted within the colonial framework that views African systems of thought and practice as primitive and savage:

The fact of the matter is that, until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly “Afrocentric” descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order.

This sorry situation, Mudimbe tells us, is partly due to the fact that “[S]ince most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism.” He also points out that the structures of the colonial establishment remained firmly in place after formal political independence:

In the early 1960s, the African scholar succeeded the anthropologist, the “native” theologian replaced the missionary, and the politician took the place of the colonial commissioner. All of them find reasons for their vocations in the dialectic of the Same and the other.

Mudimbe further observes that colonialism creates an imaginary African past in a bid to fabricate “the other”, perhaps best exemplified by tourist art. He notes that in this subjugating environment, any solid evidence of science or philosophy in Africa is dismissed by the colonisers, as illustrated by the case of Dogon astronomy which holds that the planets rotate around their axes and revolve around the Sun, but which Western authors such as Carl Sagan explain away as knowledge obtained from a Western visitor to the Dogon. Mudimbe is emphatic that anthropology was specifically designed as a tool of Western imperialist domination with which to paint the peoples of Africa as frozen in a stage of “development” long transcended by Western societies.

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According to [Samir Amin](#), current academic programmes in the social sciences in African Universities have been prescribed by the World Bank and allied authorities in order to destroy any capacity to develop critical thought. Unable to understand concrete existing systems that govern the contemporary world, the brainwashed cadres are reduced to the status of “executives” implementing programmes decided elsewhere, unable to contribute to changing that world rejected by their own people. Similarly, [Claude Ake](#) observes, “The West is able to dominate the Third World not simply because of its military and economic power, but also because it has foisted its idea of development

on the Third World through the institutions and activities of knowledge production.”

The humanities (such as literature, music and philosophy) are not doing any better, as the Western canons continue to enjoy an exalted status in the various disciplines under this category: many philosophers from Africa still take great pride in their knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Mill, and so on, while thinking very little of philosophical works by scholars from their own continent, and much less of the intellectual creations of their compatriots with no Western-type formal education. In like manner, many literary critics from Africa enjoy a sense of great accomplishment from their mastery of European literary classics while tacitly believing that nothing of similar grandeur is to be found among their own peoples. Besides, many scholars in Africa take great pride in having their works published in Western Europe and North America by what they happily refer to as “international journals” and “international publishers”, while considering publications from university presses in places such as Kigali, Dar es Salaam or Harare as of inferior status, thereby continuing to lend credence to the almost hegemonic Western system of knowledge production decades after formal independence.

Yet another important aspect of the hierarchical process of knowledge production has to do with the way in which events are reported. Many think that reports in media such as books, print and electronic news outlets are objective sources of knowledge. However, scholars of [critical discourse analysis](#) have repeatedly illustrated that such reports promote the interests of the economically dominant classes. Thus in a capitalist context, the bulk of mass media promotes the interests of the owners of capital. For example, where the police violently stop a workers’ demonstration, the media are likely to report “Four Demonstrators Shot” rather than “Police Shoot Four Demonstrators”, thereby suppressing the fact of *who* shot them. Similarly, school textbooks covertly and overtly promote capitalist values and advance the view that any challenge to such values is a threat to “stability”.

Long after political independence, African studies continue to be conducted within the colonial framework that views African systems of thought and practice as primitive and savage.

In [Fourth Industrial Revolution: Innovation or New Phase of Imperialism?](#), I pointed out that humanity is currently confronted by a world dominated by artificial intelligence, robotics, the internet of things and blockchain, resulting in a fusion of technologies that is integrating the physical, digital and biological spheres. Think of how all manner of people can determine where you are if you forget your mobile phone “Location” function on, or listen to your conversations and view your actions if you unwittingly allow an app to access your microphone and camera. Already phone manufacturers are including contact tracing apps in their devices, and many phones now have the option of a fingerprint instead of a series of numbers for passwords. Through the enormous power of artificial intelligence (“AI”), all these data are quickly analysed to produce detailed profiles of phone users—where they go, what they like listening to and watching, what they buy, among others. In short, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (“4IR”), privacy is now an illusion. Yet the bulk of these new technologies are owned by large corporations domiciled in the West and East, reducing the peoples of Africa to mere consumers subject to the whims of the owners of the technologies. All this raises the real possibility of a global dictatorship headed by the owners of these technologies reminiscent of George Orwell’s [1984](#), and it boils down to who controls knowledge production.

In [Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing](#), Miranda Fricker argues that there is a distinctively epistemic type of injustice, in which someone is wronged specifically in his or her capacity as a knower. This is precisely what Western imperialism has subjected the peoples of Africa

to. Similarly, in the preface to his celebrated work, [Epistemologies of the south: Justice against Epistemicide](#), Boaventura de Sousa Santos indicates that he seeks to defend three important postulates:

First, the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. Second, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Third, the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized.

Nevertheless, there are several encouraging initiatives to address the epistemic injustice in Africa. The valiant struggle of [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#), who has consistently pointed out that using African languages in creative writing is an act of decolonising the mind, [Kwasi Wiredu](#), who advocates for the same approach in African philosophy, and the six African philosophers who wrote book chapters in their mother tongues for the edited volume [Listening to ourselves: A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy](#), are all efforts at challenging the hegemonic Western system of knowledge production. Besides, the research and teaching projects in African languages, African oral and written histories, African oral and written literatures, African music, African art, African philosophy, among others are evidence that a sizeable number of academics in Africa have perceived the problem, and are determined to contribute to the turning of the tide.

Yet several intellectuals who have raised their voices against global capitalism and the attendant hegemonic Western system of knowledge production have borne the brunt of state violence: Samir Amin was forced into exile from his native Egypt in 1960 for his Marxist but anti-Stalinist views; Paulo Freire's success in teaching Brazilian peasants how to read landed him in prison and a subsequent long and painful exile; Walter Rodney's exposition of the damage inflicted on Africa by European mercantilism that evolved into capitalism in [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#) resulted in his imprisonment in his native land of Guyana, and his death as a result of a car bomb blast in Georgetown, Guyana, remains a mystery, as does the plane crash that cut short Claude Ake's life during the autocratic reign of Sani Abacha in Nigeria; Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged by the Sani Abacha regime in Nigeria, and Wole Soyinka escaped Abacha's murderous hand by a whisker; Ngugi wa Thiong'o spent time as a detainee without trial in a Kenyan maximum security prison for organising a peasants' theatre group to perform his anti-capitalist plays, and later went into decades of exile, and the list is much longer than this. Nevertheless, the intellectuals of the exploited and oppressed peoples of Africa must continue to innovate in a bid to contribute towards the true liberation of their continent.

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