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DEBATE

RETHINKING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN AFRICA

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Jean and John Comaroff enthusiastically claim that Africa constitutes a rich site 'of new knowledges and ways of knowing-and-being … that have the capacity to inform and transform theory in the north, to subvert its universalisms in order to rewrite them in a different, less provincial register' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011).[1] What role, then, can the African university – which, as described by Jeremiah Arowosegbe, is in a lamentable state – play in creating and generalizing these 'new knowledges'?

There are many issues that arise from Arowosegbe's important disquisition about knowledge production *on* and *in* Africa. I can engage with only a few of them here. The author should be commended for raising, again, some of the critical questions that have simultaneously energized and frustrated leading African scholars in the last seven decades or so: how endogenous knowledge *on* Africa and the world is (re)produced *in* Africa, and how such knowledge *can* be globally validated.

I start with the author's conclusion. He argues that intellectual thought and knowledge production on Africa are not 'independent' as they 'continue to exist within a borrowed and dominated framework'. I will argue that the question at the heart of intellectual thought and knowledge production in Africa is not so much about its 'independence' as it is about its 'originality'. The production of *original* knowledge and the marginalization and circumscription of the same, both internally and externally, are responsible for the (semi-)destruction of the university – both as an *idea* and as an institution – in most African states. Since the colonial era, power in Africa has regarded original knowledge – the most sublime manifestation of human liberty – as dangerous or subversive. Therefore, the political, economic and social processes that led to the emasculation of the institutions and practices of knowledge production are not incidental to the fundamental crisis on the continent: they constitute the grounds for the crisis. The debate about knowledge production, therefore, must grapple with the fact that knowledge, like all phenomena in the world, as Olúfémi Táíwò (2012: 966) reminds us, is a product; as a product, it is 'implicated within the larger modes of production (material and social) where most artificial creation takes

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[1] A related argument has been made by the Nigerian philosopher Olúfémi Táíwò, who lamented the 'very little if any respect for, and on occasion, an outright failure to recognize, the capacity of African thinkers for relevant, sophisticated theorizing that holds promise for solving problems which occur in other parts of the world' (Táíwò 2012: 980).

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place' (*ibid.*). Against this backdrop, it is useful that Arowosegbe examines the political economy of knowledge production in modern Africa and points to the processes, institutions and agencies responsible for what he describes as the 'depressing challenges' that 'research environments across Africa face'.

This crisis has produced many diagnosticians but few clinicians in the post-Cold War era. While understanding the nature of the crisis is fundamental to solving the problems arising from it, as African scholars we seem to have failed in providing sufficient, credible and feasible proposals for how we can resolve the crisis while committing ourselves to the practical challenges of making these proposals work. Undoubtedly, we need more diagnoses; however, such diagnoses must proceed towards clinical work. In doing the latter, we will have to engage with institutions beyond the academy, particularly in articulating and mobilizing for the kinds of rival motifs that will force a redirection of intellectual energies at the level of the state.

This is without prejudice to the multifarious, important and beneficial interventions by international development agencies, research institutions and foundations based in the global North – despite their 'baggage'. Such external funding and external initiatives represent one of the two major responses to the challenges of higher education in contemporary Africa. Even the major 'African' initiatives, such as CODESRIA, have had to rely on external funding. The latest of such responses include the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (ADF), a scholar fellowship programme for educational projects at African higher education institutions by African-born academics in North America, and the African Higher Education Summit. The latter was convened by TrustAfrica and held in Dakar, Senegal in March 2015, with the theme of 'revitalizing higher education for Africa's future'. The impact of such efforts should not be understated. However, unless they are additional to a massive (re-)investment by the African state in higher education specifically, and in education at all levels generally, these initiatives will not lead to major changes in the current debilitating state of higher education. Funding for knowledge production in Africa cannot be 'outsourced' to external institutions.

The other major response within Africa is the phenomenon of private universities. While private initiatives in the area of higher education are important, as the experience in the global North shows – particularly in the United States – public funding is the bedrock of higher education in the modern era. Public funding of education is the most critical foundation for generating and generalizing the creation of public good and for broadening the moral imagination of any society – two of the essential bases and functions of higher education. Post-apartheid South Africa, where the 'private sector also plays a significant, though limited, role',[2] is the latest example of this fact in modern African history. Public funding does not diminish the necessity of investment by other stakeholders,[3] but the attempt to 'transform' higher education from 'a public

[2]See 'Higher education finance and cost-sharing in South Africa' <http://gse.buffalo.edu/org/inthigheredfinance/files/Country_Profiles/Africa/South_Africa.pdf>, accessed 18 February 2015.

[3]Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries allocate 1.21 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) to higher education, compared with 0.78 per cent for African countries (see World Bank 2010: 13).

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good' supported by public resources to 'a private benefit dependent upon a diverse array of stakeholders with unique and disparate needs' (Duderstadt and Womack 2004: ix; see also St. John and Parsons 2005) – as conservatives in the US and other Western countries would have it – will eventually diminish the democratic and egalitarian role of higher education.[4] Despite the introduction of tuition fees in public universities in China since 1997, 'public funding remains the most important source of finance'.[5]

As Arowosegbe shows in his paper, the idea of private universities has been trivialized in most African countries. This raises the issue of the complicity of African scholars in the miserable conditions of higher education on the continent. In many cases, the private university in Nigeria, for instance, is on the one hand an economic and social enterprise, which provides opportunities for 'investment', and on the other an institutional expression or extension of the profile of the 'Big Man', secular or theological. Knowledge production, therefore, is often incidental to the mission of many of these private 'enterprises'.

There is no doubt that there are some notable exceptions to this rule, as Arowosegbe points out. South Africa, despite the problems arising from its peculiar history of racism, has struggled to fully embrace and extend the mission of the university idea in the post-apartheid era. It is no surprise, therefore, that its leading universities are some of the highest rated on the continent. Yet, as Mahmood Mamdani's experience in the second half of the 1990s at the University of Cape Town shows (Mamdani 2008), the post-apartheid South African academy is still working out what is 'African' within what some regard as the country's *peculiar* genealogy of knowledge, and how the *African* university will function within a 'global knowledge economy'.[6]

A fundamental reawakening needs to happen if African universities are to reclaim and transcend the excellent tradition of knowledge production in the late colonial and early postcolonial era, a tradition of knowledge production that has 'the capacity to inform and transform theory in the north', as the Comaroffs put it, and reaffirm 'the capacity of African thinkers for relevant, sophisticated theorizing that holds promise for solving problems which occur in other parts of the world', as Táíwò states. The marginalization or emasculation of *organized* and *formal* knowledge production in Africa should be approached as a life-threatening phenomenon. Even though the problems are similar all over the continent, each country – and even regions within some countries – will have to address the specificities of the crisis in the context of their realities. All stakeholders in each country will have to organize explicit approaches by which the peculiar problems they face must be fully understood in multidimensional ways. They will have to come up with a comprehensive package of solutions that will address all the fundamental causes of the crisis. Given the depth of this crisis, a state of emergency should be declared in the education sector in general,

[4]For the World Bank's typically dismal view of core reliance on public funding for higher education in Africa, disguised in the language of 'cost-sharing' and 'comprehensive approach', see World Bank (2010).

[5]See 'China' <http://gse.buffalo.edu/org/inthigheredfinance/files/Country_Profiles/Asia/China.pdf>, accessed 18 February 2015.

[6]See the contentious responses to Mamdani, such as Martin Hall (1998) and Johann Graaff (1998). See also Kamola (2011).

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and in higher education in particular, in all the countries involved. The futures of the people of these countries are at stake. It would constitute a cardinal error, therefore, to assume that there are other, more pressing issues that must take precedence over (higher) education. The fate of the knowledge industry is the measure of all progress – economic, social and political.

Alongside the above, transforming, reforming or improving democratic processes and institutions on the continent constitute an unavoidable precondition in reversing the misfortunes of African academia. Without doubt, the continent cannot continue the haemorrhaging of its intellectual capital – otherwise called 'brain drain' – as has been the case in the last three decades and still hope for a better future. The continent's immense natural resources have been a curse largely because, for the most part, the continent has failed to value and fully and consistently develop its abundant human resources. A situation in which the flowering of African intellectual energy is experienced more in the global North than within Africa does not augur well for the future of the continent.

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