

Eurocentrism, the University, and multiplicity of knowledge production sites

Contributed by Amit Basole
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Dear Edu-factory collective members

To start my scheduled post, let me join the chorus in saying how edifying and interesting the various posts on this list have been. Let me also apologize at the outset for the excessive length of the post.

By way of personal background, my first experience of university education was in the Biological Sciences. I received my bachelors and masters degrees (in microbiology and molecular biology resp.) from the University of Bombay, India and my PhD in Neuroscience from Duke University in the US. Subsequently I switched ("followed my heart?") to Political Economy and am currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The central theme on this discussion list is "Conflicts in the Production of Knowledge." There are of course many important conflicts to understand and many different ways to understand these conflicts. The one between market-oriented and non-market-oriented teaching and learning (or alternatively between liberal versus vocational/professional education) is one that has been alluded to many times. Similarly the conflicts over greater democratization of the learning process, over open access to research and so on are also important.

In my post I would like to take a somewhat different approach. The big questions that I am interested in are:

1. Can the European University (what I mean by this will become clear presently) show us a way forward out of the global socio-ecological crisis of late capitalism?
2. Further, in the context of post-colonial societies such as India, how can the modern university escape or transcend its Eurocentric origins and bounds and become more immediately relevant to society at large?

Needless to say, these are topics for entire research programs and here I can offer no more than discussion points (indeed I am not qualified to do much more). Instead of attempting to answer these directly I will raise related issues:

1. What are some of the contradictions/conflicts in the "European University" stand in the way of it being a force for radical change?
2. In the post-colonial context, how can we think of the University in relation to the other sites where knowledge is produced in society?

The "European University": Contradictions

I realize that there is no such thing as "The University", there are only universities. However, today, as a result of European colonialism, universities in far-flung corners of the Earth show some striking similarities. The most likely reason for this is not that, to take one example, economics, sociology, political science, anthropology and history are "natural" ways in which to divide the study of human society. But instead the reason we find these same "disciplines" in universities everywhere is because they are modeled on the "European University", a particular historical entity that arose in early 19th century Germany (Berlin), though of course antecedents are to be found in Paris, Bologna etc. [Note that this is not to say that "the university is a European idea", an unsurprising Eurocentrism that one often finds in historical accounts of the University, but only to point out that what we call the University today is modeled on an entity that arose in 19th Century Europe.] This much is perhaps commonplace. But what causes me to pose the question as done above is that today I see the University, particularly in the post-colonial context, but also elsewhere, as a conservative force with a status quoist bias, rather than as an agent of radical change. Let me explain.

Focusing on two main contradictions in the university, we find that the production of knowledge within the context of the disciplines allows for glaring contradictions of world-view to exist in the same site. There is no overarching ethical/moral principle that unites all disciplines. Should there be one? This is a matter for debate. I believe that lack of one makes possible the particular types of instrumental rationality that is rampant in the Science and in Engineering. Historically (prior to the fact-value separation which is the legacy of the European Enlightenment) this problem was solved by situating knowledge production in the religious context. Modern universities, in contrast either operate under a "knowledge for the sake of knowledge" dictum or even a more naked "knowledge for power" principle. Thus the only thing that unites English, Anthropology, Economics, Ecology and Engineering is that knowledge is produced there. So Anthropology can say we are all different while Economics says we are all the same, or Economics says capitalism can grow for ever while Ecology says resources are limited or the English department can say we are all postmodern while Engineering displays all the features of modernist thought and so on. And these contradictions can not only exist, but they can be taught to students who are offered hardly any way to reconcile them (institutionally that is. I am not speaking of exceptions such as individual professors). Of course I am exaggerating the case somewhat to make a rhetorical point. The existence of "ecological economics" for example, shows that disciplinary cross-talk can happen. And such examples can be multiplied. However, the very term inter-disciplinarity tells us what takes primacy (disciplines) and what comes afterwards (inter). As has been pointed out, such fragmentation stands directly in the way of a coherent and holistic understanding of human society, its evils, its impact upon its environment and its likely future trajectory.

The second conflict or contradiction is the oft-repeated one between teaching and research, between knowledge production and dissemination. But still sometimes we forget that a university performs the function, not just of supporting professors and researchers but of training a far greater number of individuals to be something other than professors and researchers (I am referring of course to undergraduate students). Thus the university should be a place where ethically-guided, community-centered individuals are produced, who have acquired a holistic picture of human society and the problems it faces but who at the same time are technically or otherwise adept at their chosen trade or field. In other words engineering, builders and so on who are not instrumentally rational. Currently we do an excellent job of the technical training and leave the ethics to whoever cares to step up to the challenge.

John Henry Newman begins his famous book "The Idea of a University" by defining the University as "a place for teaching universal knowledge." There are several keywords here that are of interest. We can take all of these in turn. Before we begin, we must clarify of course that Cardinal Newman defends a model of the university that has been termed "pre-modern". Also it is clear that for Cardinal Newman, teaching is a more important function of the university, than what he calls "advancement", (or what we might call production) of knowledge. Why, he asks, would the university have students, if its primary purpose was knowledge production ("scientific and philosophical discovery")? The division of labor between knowledge production and dissemination envisioned by Cardinal Newman (teaching = universities, research = learned societies/academies) is of course no longer true (liberal arts colleges and research institutes represent this strict division of labor today, but the research university of course combines both). The tension between teaching and research embodied in the complaint that teaching leaves little time for research, is an all-too-familiar refrain at least in the natural science departments. But there is an even more significant conflict here. We live in times of super-specialization of disciplines when academic faculty often produce knowledge only for their peers and may even be punished via academic sanctions such as denial of tenure for not producing enough knowledge for specialist consumption (e.g. publishing newspaper articles to shape public opinion, rather than publishing in referred journals). The more immediate impact upon society at large, of the university may therefore be, not knowledge produced in its research laboratories and its faculty offices, but the knowledge disseminated in its classrooms. In other words, shaping the world-view of students (and future participants in society's debates).

The multiplicity of knowledge-production sites

Finally we come to the operative phrase in Cardinal Newman's sentence, universal knowledge. I want to focus on this conflict that has been mentioned several times already on this list in the form of the debate on "multiple universalisms". However I want to shift the terms of debate slightly and pose it as a question of the "multiplicity of knowledge production sites", the relationship between these sites and the related question of "serious" and "non-serious" knowledge. This is also tangled up (at least in my mind) with the conflict between Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric scholarship. Thus far from serving as an agent of emancipatory change, the university in the post-colonial context has often been an agent of "modernization" and university scholars, often the most "Westernized", have been generally dismissive of the knowledge produced in more "traditional loci" (or subaltern knowledge). The high academy has often slavishly followed European fashions and thinkers (be it deconstruction, post-structuralism, Foucault, Derrida or whatever) for their own sake (or to get published in Western journals). This has been true whether the university was neoliberal or not although things may be changing now. This is not to say that Foucault, to take one example, has nothing interesting to say in the context of India. But that is not a given fact. It needs to be evaluated.

To make this already long post even longer, I paste below a few passages from a paper I recently co-wrote with a colleague here at UMass. Our primary concern in the quoted passages was to make the point that the lamentations often heard (for e.g. from post-colonial scholars) that for better or for worse, we are trapped within the confines of Eurocentric socio-political thought, are often a result of the fact that we are taught to regard the academy as the (only?) legitimate site of knowledge production. We further argue that if one looks to other sites of knowledge production, non-Eurocentric analyses of society abound.

[From Bhattacharya and Basole (2007) "Eurocentric Social Thought and Contemporary Political Culture in India" (forthcoming).]

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Post colonial thinkers, in so far as they cannot think in their own language, are slaves of the master's discourse—or the master-discourse. What future can such a slave claim for herself? It must be understood that a "free" future for such a slave cannot be claimed solely by "Provincializing Europe" to borrow [Dipesh] Chakrabarty's phrase. It must also be accompanied by a retrieval of (lost) local wisdom and non-European intellectual traditions, be they elite or subaltern. Not only should the postcolonial scholar historicize and contextualize Marx and Weber, (s)he should be or feel enabled to read Gangesa and Abhinavagupta [two Indian thinkers quoted by Chakrabarty as examples of "inaccessible" authors]. Sadly, Chakrabarty cannot claim such a future. He even finds the project of provincializing Europe an impossibility. [S]ince "Europe" cannot after all be provincialized within the institutional site of the university whose knowledge protocols will always take us back to the terrain where all contours follow that of my hyper-real Europe—the project of provincializing

Europe must realize within itself its own impossibility. It therefore looks to a history that embodies this politics of despair.

Chakrabarty's despair is not only the result of the recognition of a loss in the past but a failure to imagine a "free" future. Hence his despair is a permanent state of being because salvation/redemption/freedom cannot be conceived outside Eurocentric boundaries. We assert that the post-colonial social scientists' failure to retrieve non-European discourses is a measure of their own inadequacy, a corollary of their insertion in the Western academic discourse. In order to be intelligible to the Western audience, in order to publish in Western journals, they have necessarily to speak within the framework circumscribed by Western thought-categories. Thus, the latter understandably becomes the only mode of thought 'available' to them. This has been the case, we argue, with postcolonial studies as well as subaltern studies. Even those who have discovered the original loss of language find it impossible to retrace the steps back to that incidence of momentous discursive violence. This is Thatcher's TINA in the sphere of social thought.

[Further]...critiques of Eurocentrism, in so far as they are lodged in the global academic institutions—which are shaped and dominated by European theoretical traditions—are subjected to a "discursive price of admission" (John Mowitt's phrase). Even the resistance to Eurocentrism has to be based on Western texts in order to be intelligible to the reviewers and referees of international publishing circuits. Can we hope to publish in an international journal an article that refers primarily to vernacular texts, the majority of which might never be translated into major European languages? Even if it gets published, the author will surely be criticized for citing obscure texts. Yet there is a sustained articulation of challenges to European modernity in many vernacular texts— in bad print and cheap jackets— published by small local Third World publishing houses. The "unavailability" of alternative non-European discourses reflects a materiality inherent in the discursive practices and institutions of global academia—a materiality that has the effect of screening out a large set of articulations, utterances, statements and cries as "non-serious" knowledge.

This brings us to our next argument. We have earlier said that Eurocentric categories of thought have colonized our mind to such an extent that the many different processes of reproduction of our life are articulated and understood in the language of European modernity. Yet, resistance to the imperialism of categories exists too and exists everywhere, wherever such imperialism asserts itself, i.e. in all spheres of life. Consequently, counter-discourses emerge at numerous social sites, in the variety of social processes that constitute the postcolonial experience. These sites could provide us with radical alternatives to Eurocentric thought-categories—other ways of making sense of the world. These constitute an archive of "available" alternatives to European modernity. Yet, most of us suffer from a fundamental elitism in contemporary social thought, which holds that knowledge is not produced at the site of living, where multiple processes of reproduction of life intersect; rather it is produced where life ceases to be alive, where human experience turns into dead raw materials to be intellectually processed into thought-categories, i.e. at the institutional location of the academia. We believe that there are multiple sites of knowledge production in a society, the academy being only one of them.

Academic practices constitute a distinct social process. As a specific social process, it has a distinct institutional location or base (university, research institutes, journals and publishing houses), its unique rules of production and dissemination of knowledge statements (papers, conferences, university lectures, participation in the media as experts etc.) and its particular effect on other social processes (construction of meaning, production of world-outlooks etc.). But, most importantly, professional academia establishes its social status on the basis of a distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge and by claiming to be the sole site for production of "knowledge".

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Perhaps one can allude here to Gramsci's famous quote that while all humans are intellectuals, not all perform the work of (professional) intellectuals. Although of course Gramsci is not concerned with the particular issue that we are dealing with here. Also note that our argument is not that professional intellectuals do not perform an important function in society. Indeed they do, however, that function a) obviously cannot be delinked from the position they occupy in the capitalist world-economy and culture (i.e. there are no universal intellectuals) and b) professional intellectuals (specific or otherwise) are not the only producers of knowledge, nor even "the most important" by whatever criterion.

Here the concept that we have been developing at the Vidya Ashram in Varanasi becomes immediately relevant. This is the concept of "Dialogues on Knowledge in Society". The emphasis is not on conflict between the various knowledge production sites (universities, schools, monasteries and mosques, small businesses, ordinary life) which certainly exist, but instead on the possibility of engaging them in dialog with each other.

Amit