Katharina Schramm
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Institutional Transformation in South Africa and Germany

An Interview with Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni

Katharina Schramm (KS): In your book "Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization", you make reference to W.E.B. Du Bois, who famously stated in "The Souls of Black Folk" that the problem of the twentieth century is the color line. Du Bois explicitly addresses racism and its specific articulation in the United States as a political, social, and academic priority. You bring up a new twist to this by stating that the problem of the twenty-first century is the epistemic line. Could you elaborate on this? How does the focus on knowledge relate to the problem of race and racism?

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (SNG): Thank you so much for that question. I am coming from a background where I see intersections between existential and epistemic injustices. So, I don't want to take race as a thing in itself. I want to take race as an enabler of other problems. This is why I thought it would be important to link the two, that is the color line and the epistemic line. The link is here: if in using race, some people are deemed it to be sub-human, fundamentally when they are sub-human, their knowledge is questioned, and that is where I thought the existential and the epistemic really link. In other words, if a group of people's humanity itself is degraded and questioned, fundamentally, it means their epistemic virtue also suffers. And to me, we need to read this together. And I am assisted in thinking this way by various works which have emerged even after the publication of my book. Particularly if you read the work of Sylvia Tamale, for instance, when she says, we need to connect the dots across racism, colonialism, sexism, or patriarchy. I have taken that one fundamental aspect of the work of decolonizing is really to connect the dots. And this issue of the color line and the epistemic line was really a way of

connecting the dots. They can seem to be disconnected, but they are inextricably intertwined in in a very complex way.

KS: Thank you! One of the issues that you are also addressing is the Decolonization Project of the University as an institution. Can you elaborate on what the greatest challenges are, in your view, to achieve this goal of decolonizing the University?

SNG: In fact, the first point, perhaps, is that I don't take a decolonization as a technical process. I take decolonization as a terrain of struggles. And because of that, this is where the problems of lack of precision emerge – in terms of what exactly does it mean to decolonize an institution. So, the first challenge, for anyone trying to do the project of decolonizing a university, of course, arises from the act of moving from theory to praxis. And when we are moving from theory to praxis, praxis needs precision, timelines, strategic and operational plans. You need to be precise about what you mean by decolonization, when it comes to doing it practically within a university. So, it fundamentally means, you need to be able to identify which domains you are going to intervene in. And again, this depends on where you are located geographically, epistemically, ideologically and socially.

I will speak more about where I was located in South Africa, at the University of South Africa (UNISA). One domain which really needed immediate attention, and was more visible, was the domain of demographics – the white/black, male/female demographics. We needed that one, we had no excuse not to intervene to reverse racism and patriarchy. It looked easy, because it's visible is, everyone can see it, that at the top echelons of the full professors is a domination of men and those men were also mainly white. The idea, therefore, was, how do we move those who are concentrated in the lecturer and senior lecturer positions up the ladder? Again, you can't do it by lowering whatever the entry points or the criteria for promotion are; you needed to find other ways. There are also very difficult options to do: making sure that people have the right publications, in order to move into positions, people have the right academic qualifications in order to be promoted. And that

fundamentally also had practical implications because you needed to put in money so that you take them away from teaching so that they concentrate in their PhDs. Then when they come back, that's when we can promote them. So that was one area where we tried to intervene.

We also tried to intervene in other complex areas like the institutional cultures of the university. The institutional cultures which are very complex in themselves in the sense that they are sexist, they are patriarchal, they are racist, they are xenophobic! That was the most challenging. We had really a dedicated colleague who was responsible for institutional transformation and it was very hard to define where to start. Because those who enjoy the benefits of the structures I have described – the patriarchal, the sexist, the racist structures – they were saying they don't see any problem with the structures, and we were trying to convince them that, no, the status quo cannot be maintained, we needed to intervene at that level! One of the matters arising pertained to sexual harassment, and the university, since it is not a judiciary entity, cannot prosecute but it can raise the ethical standards and protocols of professionalism as well as notions of collegiality as arsenals to fight the scourge of sexual harassment. The only way you can intervene decisively is to raise institutional ethical antenna so as to respond and deal with a plethora of accusations some of which were difficult to verify. But ethical interventions enabled condemnation with the university claiming high moral and civic ground to take steps and action. Of course, accused colleagues also had to defend themselves using the courts of law, and then the courts often kick the ball back into the university, and the university loses a lot of money through this process particularly where justice was violated. So, practically, you face many hurdles in the struggle for institutional transformation.

But the other issue, which is very challenging, is that in order to do decolonization, the people who are speaking about doing decolonization of the university are themselves products of the universities. The same universities produced the people who are criticizing the University, and that makes it very hard for them really to

jump out of themselves. They are products of what they are trying to change. I found that to be also another, very, very difficult issue, because it means you need to unlearn so many things at a personal level, at a collective level. So that some things which you thought these were the right ways of doing things – you need to begin to unlearn them. I found that to be the most challenging in the sense that we embody the problems which we are trying to change: the patriarchy, the racism – it is the people inside who are actually produced by the same university who are trying to change it. And that, to me, it looked like a *cul de sac*, if I can use that word.

Another, broader issue which actually frames all this, is that when we're talking about decolonizing the university, decolonizing an institution and that institution has a tendency for posturing, and posturing means that it pretends to accept that it is on the defensive, and is open to change. But generally, it then absorbs the radical ideas, and dilutes them through committees, through debates in Senate, through debate in Council. At the end of the day, a radical idea like decolonization ends up disciplined into compliance, which is not helping in decolonizing institutions. You find people, the stakeholders, who are supposed to be at the forefront of doing decolonization, the Deans, the Heads of Department, they present very glossy Power Point Presentations about how many modules they have decolonized, how many study guides they have rewritten etc. But they just do it as a fulfillment because the university demands it. It is not in their hearts and minds. I found that to be another big challenge.

The other challenge which I see, and which I experienced, was that we need also to be very careful when we are doing decolonization: Because the university basically, from my experience, works through dissensus rather than consensus. Academics are always engaged in competing ideas, contesting ideas and debating issues. And if you see one day that a university, there is consensus, they agree on one idea, we have to be worried of having destroyed it as a space for critical thinking, as far as I'm concerned. So how do you take critique not as resistance? From an administrative

point of view, there is need to deal with resistance to institutional transformation to the extent that questioning this can easily be defined as resistance. But for me, having come from the ranks of academics myself, I found it very difficult to quickly say: somebody is resisting. So, what I used to do is to then go back, maybe two or three times to the same colleagues to try to come up with a more persuasive argument about what we are trying to do, and take their questions really as seeking to understand and maintaining the vigilance of the intellectual, when a new idea is thrown at them. I was going also to be worried – if I just come in, "Let's decolonize!", then everyone would just say yes, yes. Academics are not easily persuaded and convinced.

But again, through that, there are also opportunistic elements, who want to maintain the status quo. And also, the issue of academic freedom kicks in every time and was itself open for abuse by conservative elements bent on maintenance of the status quo. From the vantage point of decolonization, we tried to escalate and radicalize the concept of academic freedom to the level of epistemic freedom, that is, the right of the previously subordinated and colonized groups particularly to think, write and theorize issues as themselves free from epistemic mimicry—we built this from Steve Biko who is remembered for-"I write what I like." We also escalated academic freedom to academic democracy, that is, dealing with representation in committees, in senate and other structures of the university to reflect the actually existing demographics of the institution. But I think the overarching challenge, particularly pertaining to decolonizing the institution, is really this: The time it entered the University, the time we tried to institutionalize it, it really lost its way in the bureaucratic processes. In fact, the idea was to do decolonizing according to the established forms of doing things – and that – at the end of the day, is not the product is not decolonization, it is something else.

Then, the other topical issue which we tried to engage was the issue of decolonizing the curriculum. And one issue for certain was that some people thought because

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there was this transformation office, which I was embedded in, it would change the curriculum for the University. But that is an impossibility! The issue is that it is academics who change their curricula! But how do you use the same academics who produced a problematic curriculum to produce another one? That is the challenge which we faced. If people are satisfied and say, "I'm teaching Durkheim, I'm teaching Karl Marx. I'm teaching Max Weber in sociology. This is the canon!" – how do you persuade them to see that there is a problem in that? So, we spent all our time trying to engage them in the politics of knowledge. And indeed, to try to say to them, "But can't you see that this is narrow? Why don't we expand the shoulders of the giants on which we stand? Why don't we bring other people who have thought the social from Asia, from Caribbean, from Africa? What about the women scholars? Why is it these three dead men who are standing here throughout?" One of the issues was that we ended up with a very practical question which they then asked us: "As for us, we agree with the decolonization overall. But what you see in our curriculum is how far we can go." And when they said that, I thought "Ah, we will need to develop an online staff development course, which is basically on politics of knowledge. So that we just teach about politics of knowledge to the extent that academics will see for themselves what is wrong with what they are doing!" That was one intervention which we proposed.

Then, maybe the last is also epistemologically, because we use this word epistemology all the time: changing the epistemology, changing the epistemology! But if you go back to V.Y. Mudimbe, it looks like so many of what appeared as changes, are changes which are really dead within the Colonial Library, if I can use that. And that needed even a longer process. This also means that the danger is that from an administrative point of view, decolonization is supposed to be an event which comes to an end at a particular moment. But from a struggles' point of view, this is a process! It is a process where even those who are pushing it must continuously learn to unlearn, and also to learn new things and new ways of doing. They must also be vigilant about falling back into paradigms of difference, nativism,

into ghettoization, into cultural relativism, into essentialisms, and all that! All these things are looming above. When I was in the in the office of the Vice Chancellor, I always said we will need to drive a decolonization and the transformation of the University, which is predicated on continuous research, which also means that when people bring in their critique of decolonization, we can deal with that critique from an informed point of view!

KS: It is really interesting to hear about your experience in South Africa. Now you've been at the University of Bayreuth, in Germany, in a different academic system for the past two years and you are also Vice Dean of Research in the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellency. Can you compare the situations in South Africa and in Germany? Are there other issues on the table here in Germany, or are they the same? Perhaps you can speak about your experience here.

SNG: In fact, it's a very interesting experience, because when I moved here, my first presentation was at the "Africa Knows" conference in the Netherlands. When I gave the keynote address, somebody asked: "You are talking about decolonization – but you have moved from Africa to Europe! How do you do decolonization from Europe?" And that is when I invoked Ramon Grosfoguel, his points about the epistemic movement, the geographical movement, and the social movement – their locations, and that we need not to confuse those three. People can move physically, but does this translate to their movement epistemically from what they are committed to? But I think if we want to compare the initiative for decolonizing here in Bayreuth and what we were doing in South Africa – obviously we need to consider the different origins and genealogies of the universities. Even if they are related, they are part of the modern world, university system. But I think they also have variations in terms of their origins, and in terms of their ideological orientation. Bearing in mind that in South Africa, we were really facing one of the worst expressions of colonialism and racism, whereby even universities were divided into English, into Afrikaans, into Black, into the Bantustan universities. In Germany, there was nothing like that. But

that is at the institutional level.

In Bayreuth, when people talk about decolonizing, it is basically reduced to diversification, inclusion, notions of equality. That is at the personnel level. Then also, when I came here, one thing for certain which I saw, which is very different from, say, South Africa, is the commitment to disciplines. I think in Bayreuth there is a strong commitment to disciplines and the defense for the disciplines. Whereas in South Africa, people were trying by all means – they were failing, but they were trying to – to transcend disciplines in a in a way. But in Bayreuth, even when they move from their disciplines into the space they call African studies, they go there carrying their disciplines, always with a view that one day we will withdraw back to their disciplines. So, they are not letting go of the disciplines.

The second issue, which again links to the genealogies of institutions and academic traditions: there is this idea of scientific, objective scholarship. In Africa, I think there is a long history of trying to problematize this and move beyond it. There is a long history of trying to say that this has its own problems, it has its own instrumentality which supports a particular dominance of particular systems, particular institutions etc. So, I found that here in Germany there is still that idea, "but we still want to maintain good scholarship" as an end in itself. And that understanding of good scholarship is framed vis-à-vis scholarship that is depicted as ideologically driven, subjective and activist. It is from this context that talk of two camps arose of those who do scientific scholarship and those who do ideological driven scholarship. The implications for this pursuit of scientific scholarship might lead one to being oblivious of interwoven existential, epistemic and injustices pervading the knowledge domain. The other matter arising from this is that of notions of standards, excellence and good scholarship being used to resist decolonization initiatives. But this challenge is not new, even within African it remains unresolved and in the 1960s it took the form of scholars excited by ideas and intellectuals committed to social, political, economic and epistemic changes in line with

imperatives of resisting racism, colonialism, capitalism and sexism. Personally, I think we can be both scholars and intellectual activists simultaneously and I also see the fundamental issues being about the search for truth and social change simultaneously. I don't see value in agenda-less scholarship. Scholarship can't be a means and an end in itself.

The third issue is that even if we are thinking from Africa, or from South Africa, decolonization, does not mean the same thing across institutions! At the University of Cape Town (UCT), there was a statue of Cecil John Rhodes. At UNISA there was no statue. We could not fight a statue with does not exist. Therefore, you find, when the #RhodesMustFall movement moved into Wits University, it picked up the fees question (as #FeesMustFall). When it moved to UNISA, we picked up the existential question of the precarious employment of the security guards and the sweepers. This is what the students picked. And they also picked the issue of changing the names of the buildings. But, generally, the issue of insourcing of the outsourced, lowly paid staff was a major issue at UNISA. So, it will mean that every time we are thinking about decolonization, we must take into account where we are standing, the context in which we are doing it. Doing decolonization in Bayreuth will never be the same as doing it at UNISA. Because they have different histories. I have been invited into so many spaces ever since I came here to Europe to talk about decolonization, but I say: It depends. You need to have a full understanding of your institution: What are the challenges? And you need to put them on the table and then develop your decolonizing project based on those existential issues which you see, you can't just copy a template from somewhere and bring it here. It doesn't work that way!

KS: Yes, that's also important. You addressed the tendency to hold on to disciplinary affiliations in German academia. But I want to ask you nevertheless: You are part of the anthropology department at the University of Bayreuth, and I'm wondering how you perceive the significance of researching and debating race and racism in this

disciplinary field. Do you see anything particular in anthropology where you would say that it could make an intervention into these debates, or what is lacking?

SNG: To me, anthropology is a very interesting discipline in the sense that for a long time it was accused of being the handmaiden of colonialism. But at the same time, it developed, I think, superior methodological approaches, particularly the approaches of the long fieldwork and thick description whereby you spend a time really with the people whom you want to understand. That is what decoloniality is trying to say and calls for escalation of this to the level of co-production of knowledge! The anthropological approach has the best potential to reach this level of co-production of knowledge and disconnection from epistemic extractivist methodologies. You know this joke about the indigenous people of Latin America that in every family in Latin America there is a sixth member, and this sixth member is always the anthropologist who stays there. But that idea of staying there, I think, is an important idea of really trying to co-produce knowledge. As long as the anthropologists become sensitive to the issue of extractivism, then their methodology has something to contribute. This is why, when I was given the option of where I would want to be affiliated here in Bayreuth – history or elsewhere? I thought that anthropology was the better home than history, really because of the methodologies which they try to use, and the attempt to speak from the field, formulate theory from the field.

KS: I think that gives us some hope also in terms of the empirical research on race and racism, because a lot of the discussion is often a discourse-based analysis of ideologies etc. But then there are also challenges to bring that to the level of research…

SNG: And anthropologists' interest really in the indigenous people! Whether they were studying them initially for wrong reasons, but they might be studying them now for good reasons.

KS: Sabelo, thank you so much!

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