

HOMOGENIZE AND RULE: EMPIRES OF THE MIND IN 21ST CENTURY HIGHER EDUCATION

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When intercultural learning takes place in a context where European languages and Eurocentric worldviews, histories, and markers of excellence are privileged, then study abroad becomes an instrument of sustaining global inequality. In this essay, I have reviewed the responses stemming from epistemologies of the Global South to the hegemonic discourse on legitimate knowledge creation. As a practitioner of higher education internationalization, I am concerned with the potential for projects and practices to nurture other ways of knowing¹⁶. In light of the conceptual discussion in the first part of the essay, I have analyzed salient features of the New Higher Education Policy proposed by the Government of India in 2019.

Hegemonic Epistemes: Science is Science is Science

According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, epistemologies of the Global North which rely on systematic observation and controlled experimentation and thereby claim greater “rigor and instrumental potential” over other ways of knowing, “be they lay, popular, practical, commonsensical, intuitive or religious,” possess a “privileged validity” (De Sousa Santos, 2018: 2). The importance of studying epistemologies of the Global South stems from the fact that ideational hegemonies serve an important real-world cause of domination by first establishing empires of the mind. To put it in the words of De Sousa Santos, the privileged validity of knowledge systems spawned by Western centric modernity contribute to “reinforcing the exceptionalism of the Western world vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and by the same token to drawing the abyssal line that separated, and still separates, metropolitan from colonial societies and sociabilities” (2018: 5). Indeed, the empires of the mind have shown remarkable resilience even as the economic interests and political projects they helped build have suffered less certain fortunes. Susan Hawthorne explains that the “knowledge spread most widely is that which is recognized by the powerful” (Hawthorne, 2002: 64) and the relationship to power is what leads such knowledge to support “the imposition of sameness, homogeneity, monopoly, monotony and monoculturalism” (Hawthorne, 2002: 68). Shiv Visvanathan exemplifies this argument by citing conceptual building blocks in Economics “especially of efficiency, productivity and growth where rationality and efficiency do not yield to a socio-biology, a lifeboat ethics syndrome where those in

¹⁶ In my earlier work I have shown how the “impact of mainstream paradigms of internationalization on higher education globally has made us acutely aware of the deep-rooted biases in knowledge creation and dissemination” (Unkule, 2019: 66).

the boat refuse to help those drowning” (Visvanathan, 2018). Estimating the cost at which epistemic dominance is sustained he aptly finds that “the idea of fraternity, plurality and diversity have been poor cousins of western political thought, conceptual country bumpkins without the universalist sheen or cosmopolitanism that the ideas of liberty and equality convey” (Visvanathan, 2018) impoverishing conceptions of minority politics in the Global North (among other repercussions discussed later).

Formulations and concepts stemming from other ways of knowing too have lent themselves to application in practice. In my monograph *Internationalising the University: A Spiritual Approach*, I have explored this dynamic at play as it transcends the spiritual realm and supports, for instance, anti-imperialist, nationalist movements. However, these ideas do not lay claim to “privileged validity” and are more open to transformation through practice, thereby meeting the standard for Tagore’s living ideals. Yet, it is for the same reason that they fail to meet the criteria of validity and generalizability as set out and defined by the hegemonic paradigm.

De Sousa Santos identifies the struggle against “capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy” (2018: ix) as the common denominator in epistemologies of the Global South. He is careful to de-center them spatially by acknowledging that even as they may not be dominant in many regions located in the geographical South, their existence might be evident in parts of the geographical North. Through this spatial decentralization, we make room for their growth and dissemination via exchange giving rise to a potential role for internationalization of higher education. A closer reading of De Sousa Santos reveals that epistemologies of the Global South stand against the concept of hegemonic knowledge systems and the structures of oppression the latter serve to legitimize. In this sense, they are a reminder that “there are epistemologies of the South only because, and to the extent that, there are epistemologies of the North” (De Sousa Santos, 2018: 2). In other words, they redirect us to the partial and the particular underlying that which claims to be universal. They signify “other ways of knowing” based on lived experiences that depart from the hegemonic mainstream norm.

De Sousa Santos distinguishes between knowledges which appropriate reality and ways of knowing which embody reality. Lived experience is the key to access the other ways of knowing inherent to epistemologies of the South. This requirement strengthens the case for experiential learning and an internationalization agenda for higher education that emphasizes not only learning “about” but also learning “from” and learning “with” Southern contexts. However, allowing for experience alone would not go far enough towards achieving the aim of decolonizing the mind, unless and until the frameworks within which the experience is received, processed, and expressed undergo radical re-examination and innovation.

Hawthorne cautions that hegemonic knowledge systems seek to maintain their advantage by adopting methods that are “most likely to be coercive and bludgeoning... But they

might also be inductive: promises of catch up development or of a consumer heaven are examples” (Hawthorne, 2002: 69). This last qualification is important as it redirects us not just to the form and content of education but the basic goals and aspirations behind seeking and delivering it. Elsewhere I have observed that the “correlation between social status and access to knowledge is likely to especially hold in the so-called knowledge society” (Unkule, 2019: 24), which, at present, we pride ourselves on being. In this context, I have revisited the position of Rabindranath Tagore, according to whom “the promise that offering knowledge to the learner as stepping stones to status and power was akin to bribery.”¹⁷ More pertinent to the higher education internationalization agenda, Hawthorne writes:

The power of attraction can be used (and misused) at both the individual and collective level. The “psychological dependence” of the powerless can be seen in global culture in instances of the allure of the Western lifestyle presented to young people in countries where the West is still a fantasy world (Hawthorne, 2002: 84)

In the next section, the push-back that has stemmed from thinking about epistemologies of the Global South will be addressed.

Responses: Do you Speak Ethno?

Much of early higher education internationalization discourse was based on the idea of “identifying gaps” and “building capacities” in those parts of the world where education systems were portrayed as “playing catch-up.” Hawthorne describes this attitude as “not seeing,” (Hawthorne, 2002: 97) designed to identify and perpetually sustain “gaps” and “false problems” which the dominant knowledge system can address to ultimately strengthen its grip. Such is the impact of consistent not seeing that today institutions in the Global South themselves have championed the concept of capacity building. Thus, the first response is to start seeing and stop mistaking difference for lack or absence.

The project of resistance to monocultures of knowledge and the homogenizing onslaught of globalization still leaves us with the question of operationalizing diversity towards developing frameworks for learning. Visvanathan proposes that “the dialogue of knowledges, of medical systems, of religions, has to be a critical part of the democratic imagination” (Visvanathan, 2018). From a practical standpoint he urges that “every school and society group and community takes upon itself to keep a craft, a language, or a species alive as a way of life and as a

¹⁷ In his essay “An Eastern University” Tagore presciently wrote: “But unfortunately, education conducted under a special providence of purposefulness, of eating the fruit of knowledge from the wrong end, does lead one to that special paradise on earth, the daily rides in one’s own carriage and pair. And the West, I have heard from authentic sources, is aspiring in its education after that special cultivation of worldliness.” Online, available at: <http://tagoreweb.in/Render/ShowContent.aspx?ct=Essays&bi=72EE92F5-BE50-40D7-AE6E-0F7410664DA3&ti=72EE92F5-BE50-4A47-DE6E-0F7410664DA3>

lifeworld,” in a spirit of trusteeship. In attempting to embrace learning of diversity through study abroad experiences, I have proposed a model called “a study trip to the pluriverse” which fundamentally attempts to distance “the student from the security of received facts” (Unkule, 2019: 150). I would further urge that the purpose of meaningful internationalization should not be limited to exposing students to novel experiences but to actively provide frameworks through which students are able to process these experiences and shed the baggage of assumptions of universal validity.

Lastly, the assertion of diversity should not be exclusionary. The aim is to “build an expanded commons on the basis of otherness” (De Sousa Santos, 2018: 5). It needs to be founded in the understanding that unequal power relations hurt the dispossessed perhaps more perpetually and visibly, but ultimately inflict significant harm on those who wield power as well. The current crisis faced by the liberal international order—the reverberations of which have spared no part of the world and arguably are felt more starkly in those which claim to be its architects—should provide a strong impetus to widespread acknowledgment of this proposition.

India’s New Higher Education Policy and Approach to Internationalization

In the concluding section, I will evaluate the extent to which India’s new higher education policy and the prevailing vision in the country behind internationalizing universities contributes to the mission of building an expanded commons based on otherness. Chapter nine of the draft new education policy (Ministry of Human Resource Development or MHRD of the Government of India or GoI) which is dedicated to higher education, envisages creation of “world class multidisciplinary higher education institutions across the country.” Use of the term “world class” is widespread in higher education policy discourse and the inherent imagination and association behind its usage is of a University in the Global North. The twin goals of providing “21st century competencies for future work roles,” (MHRD) while at the same time contributing to “a democratic, just, socially conscious, self-aware, cultured and humane nation, with liberty, equality, fraternal spirit and justice for all (MHRD)” are set out for higher education in the policy framework. However, the ways in which these two aims may or may not be compatible does not receive serious consideration. Instead, adoption of liberal education is seen as the solution:

Happily and coincidentally, the aforementioned multidisciplinary education and 21st century capabilities necessary for the employment landscape of the future—such as critical thinking, communication, problem solving, creativity, cultural literacy, global outlook, teamwork, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility - will not only help to develop outstanding employees but also outstanding citizens and communities (MHRD, GoI, 2019: 203).

The policy also lacks an engagement with the assumptions and frameworks of western modernity at the heart of the off-the-shelf liberal education model. Instead, this issue is

sidestepped entirely by portraying the adoption of liberal education as a revival, rather than a novel approach. Antecedents of the liberal arts curriculum are found in the idea of “64 kalas” or arts which “included subjects such as singing, playing musical instruments, and painting but also ‘scientific fields’ such as engineering, medicine and mathematics” (MHRD, GoI, 2019: 208), referred to in ancient Indian texts. Further, this kind of learning is attributed to the ancient centers of learning, Nalanda and Takshashila. Thus, the opportunity to learn from any local or historical frames of reference is lost by bracketing them with “liberal education” rather than revisiting them in their temporal and socio-cultural context. And yet again, the attempt to demonstrate compatibility with the hegemonic approach to science and knowledge creation is in evidence; indeed, the success of US-based Ivy League schools is cited as a key argument in favor of embracing liberal arts education (MHRD, GoI, 2019: 224).

The internationalization agenda set out in the policy regards reputation of institutions as the most important factor informing student decisions about choice of study destination. In maintaining this view, the university system in India has been exposed by policy makers to the assessment and judgment of international ranking measures. I have fully explored the implications of the emphasis on rankings elsewhere but here it is important to reiterate that this is not only a self-defeating proposition but also based on an empirically unexamined hypothesis about learner preferences. It is further interesting to observe that public support to Indology is conceived as part of the internationalization strategy. The policy document unabashedly notes that “departments for Indic studies will also be funded in several institutions on a competitive basis, so that even Indian students do not have to go abroad to learn Indology as is often the case today” (MHRD, GoI, 2019: 254). Although the authors of the policy deserve credit for an honest appraisal of the current situation, from a perspective of nurturing Southern epistemology, this conception is marred by two inherent flaws. First, the scientific discipline of Indology as taught in western institutions is assumed to be the only legitimate way of learning about a country, its people, and their worldview. Second, the premise underlying the proposed measure is that if international students are coming to India it must be to study “about India”¹⁸. A policy framework concerned with contributing to an expanded commons based on otherness would rather ask, “what can students learn about history or environmental studies or software programming uniquely in India?” A related proposed step is to fund universities to design special courses in Yoga and Ayurveda in a bid to enhance their allure for international students. In an

¹⁸ Based on my experience of hosting study abroad programs for international students in India, I have found that what students study depends largely on the structure of the program. When they sign up for very brief immersion programs and have no say over curriculum, they end up taking courses about Indian constitution, economy, foreign policy etc. However, when the study period is of longer duration and students opt for courses which will count towards their degrees, they do not have a tendency to select India-specific courses. In fact, in my experience, unless study of Hindi for instance is made mandatory by the home institution, there is negligible student demand for it. Unfortunately, it is also the case that globally, HEIs and governments are favoring the short-term immersion model when encouraging students from the North to seek study experiences in the South.

imagination and a discourse that is otherwise steeped in ideas and practices bequeathed by the dominant knowledge system of the North, this seems more like a half-hearted nod to the instrumental potential of ethnoscience rather than a wholesome effort to draw on other ways of knowing and maximise the value integral to diversity.

Looking inward to find our core strengths is an essential precondition to participating in global knowledge creation and cultural exchange. Policy makers and higher education leaders should heed the prophesy that “epistemologies of the South exist today so that they will not be necessary someday” (De Sousa Santos, 2018: 2).

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