

Class, Race, Gender and the Production of Knowledge:  
Considerations on the Decolonisation of Knowledge <sup>1</sup>

Helena Sheehan



The history of philosophy is a fascinating story. It is the long and complex struggle of our species to conceptualise the universe and our place in it. As a teenager, outside the school curriculum, and later in university, I studied what I later came to call the canonical history of philosophy. When I became active on the left and especially when I became a Marxist, I had to go through it all again and re-assess it from a new perspective, which meant embedding it in its socio-historical context, interrogating it in a new way and opening up the possibility of an alternative history of philosophy.

As a university teacher, I also taught it, always in socio-historical context and never as an internalist history with one philosopher taking up the agenda and arguments of the other without reference to the culture, politics and economics of the times. After I went through this canonical history, going from the presocratics to postmodernism, I asked students to go back on this history and note who was present and who was absent, to ask what Africans, females, proletarians should make of what could be seen as a Eurocentrist, male, elite history, a history produced by a class structure in which some engaged in the pursuit of higher knowledge, while others laboured from below to feed, clothe and shelter them.

Here are the questions I set for them and for myself: In the canonical narrative about the history of knowledge, who are the players? Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? How did it come to be? What happens when the outsiders start to come inside? Is it enough to include those who have been excluded? Or has knowledge itself been tainted by the exclusions of race, class, gender and colonial conquest? If the history of knowledge has been shaped by the world view of those who held power, do we renounce the history of philosophy, the history of science, the history of culture until now and start over? Or is it possible to engage in a critical reconstruction of the intellectual inheritance of the ages? Can academic disciplines be transformed? How? How is this tension playing itself out in contemporary academe? What is the role of philosophy, sociology, history, etc in the transformation? How has it been registered in debates called the theory wars, the culture wars, the science wars? What is going on in current debates about African philosophy and feminist epistemology? How do movements such as Afrocentrism and ecofeminism come into play? How does all this relate to positivism, postmodernism and historical materialism? Do our patterns of thinking need to be fundamentally re-cast? How should a liberation movement come to power with an agenda of academic transformation address these issues? Or will all of this be marginalised beyond caring as the marketisation of universities proceeds?

So how did it come to be? The history of knowledge is rooted in the social division of labour according to class, race and gender. In primitive societies, all labour was required to produce the material means of subsistence. As development advanced, the social division of labour became ever more specialised. In the separation of manual and mental labour, higher knowledge was confined to an elite. A series of profound cleavages run through the history of knowledge along the fault lines opened up by exclusions of class, race and gender.

However, there have also been forces for democratisation of knowledge – from the challenge to feudal authority by ascendant bourgeoisie through the liberation movements of past century to whatever outposts of progressive thought and challenges there are to the neo-liberalisation of universities today.

In terms of gender, the social division of labour has cut deeply into the process of knowing. Most overtly through the historical exclusion of women from the process of philosophy, science, politics, etc, but also more subtly through the psychological severing of personality according to gender, such that masculinity was defined as rational, theoretical, scientific, political, while femininity was emotional, experiential, personal, domestic. Because of this, knowledge has developed in terms of a sharp and false dichotomy between what was identified as masculine and feminine, not only by including the male of the species and excluding the female, but by representing the perspective of male experience of the world and not the female and by the dominance of “masculine” characteristics within the process of knowing itself, leading to a distorted concept of rationality.

In terms of race, a similar bifurcation of basic characteristics was attributed along racial lines to justify colonial conquest and the social division of labour and distribution of resources stemming from that. Europeans were logical and scientific, the masters of advanced political, economic and technical prowess, whereas Africans were more primitive, more tribal, closer to the earth, more spiritual, less rational, more suited to till the land than to rule it, more prone to excel in in song, dance and other forms of culture than in pursuit of higher knowledge. Even within Europe, similar stereotypes prevailed between north and south and even now form the characterisation of Germany v Greece. Even within the north of Europe, in the characterisation of England v Ireland. It is always the legacy of conquest, of the social division of labour and distribution of resources.

In terms of class, the most basic of divisions structuring the social division of labour and distribution of resources, the right to rule, to consume what others have produced and to access and define higher knowledge was historically confined to a tiny elite of the world’s population while the rest laboured from below to serve their interests. Those who ruled were characterised as having both superior entrepreneurial skill and intellectual acumen to dominate the economy, politics, education and institutions of civil society, while those who laboured from below to produce the material means of existence were characterised as fit only for manual labour. As with gender, race and ethnicity, it shaped not only access to knowledge but the very constitution of knowledge.

However, these patterns have not gone uncontested. The liberation movements of the past two centuries have challenged not only the existing structures of power but the prevailing patterns of thought. Bertolt Brecht’s great poem “Questions from a worker who reads” is a powerful manifesto of history from below.

These movements have had not only political consequences but intellectual consequences. These movements have brought not only demands for inclusion of the excluded, but have raised far-reaching questions about the nature of knowledge produced by those who have been included. The history of knowledge has come to be perceived as shaped by the world view of those who held power. It has reflected the experience and interests of a tiny elite of the world’s population. Therefore, all existing knowledge has been tainted and distorted by the exclusions of class, race, gender, imperial power.

I propose we look at this process in terms of a dialectic of struggle from oppression to liberation. Those who are outsiders to the dominant forms of social power first demand inclusion, more or less within existing structures of power and modes of thought. This is marked by an epistemology of empiricism and a politics of liberalism.

Then comes realisation that patriarchy / racism / capitalism / imperialism have shaped the very essence of the social order and even penetrated to the very core of personality. Therefore, for women to adopt male modes of working, thinking, writing will not do any more. Rationality itself is seen as distorted through its association with the male experience of the world and its exclusion of the female. This is the impulse to negation, rejection, separatism. Ironically, although its impulse is to repudiate, it ends up reinforcing the existing division of labour and psychosocial

severing of human personality, often essentialising and romanticising the characteristics ascribed by the coloniser, seeing Africa as locus of superior human essence whereby Africans are intuitive, holistic, communal, cosmological, connected to land and ancestors, whereas Europeans are logical, fragmented, calculating, individualist and materialist. It is marked by an epistemology of romanticist irrationalism or social constructivism, a politics of separatism and destruction, of postmodernist fragmentation and nihilism.

A further stage is to re-appropriate and re-construct the history of knowledge from the position of a new realisation.

The basic positions in debates over the constitution of knowledge are: conservatism, liberalism, postmodernism, historical materialism.

Assuming, as we did in the 1960s, that all was not well and that our universities needed to deal with the issues raised by movements highlighting the exclusions, deceptions and oppressions of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, we rejected the conservative position. What then? What about the liberal position?

First there is the inclusion of the excluded. Our universities today are inhabited by a very different population than inhabited them in the past. In much of the world from the 1960s and in South Africa from the 1990s, many students and staff were the descendants of the excluded in class, race and gender terms. Many were happy just to get there and not to question what they found there. Not that all is sorted even on the level of inclusion, despite all that has been achieved. When I first came to South Africa, I witnessed many protests against financial exclusion and I see them still happening now with turbulent confrontations and even fatal consequences.

Nevertheless, many of us who came to the universities from which our ancestors were excluded, at first wide-eyed and accepting, began to raise questions, coming not only from our own development of critical consciousness, but from the social movements of our times – in my case, from the 1960s new left in the US.

Here we come to the larger and deeper issue in the rise of the repressed. We engaged in questioning that went to the very theoretical foundations of traditional disciplines as well as bringing new fields into being. We demanded history from below, black studies, women's studies, labour studies. We were infuriated at academic conferences when our elders proclaimed the value neutrality of philosophy, sociology, history and economics. We talked long into the night questioning the dogmas of church, state and capital. We examined our existing world views and constructed new ones. We won many victories and universities are very different today as a result.

There are various steps or alternative paths in that process. Regarding race: Add black history to white history. Revise the dominant story to include the African origins of the species and early African civilisations, to take a critical view of slavery, colonisation and unequal terms of trade, to celebrate African identity. Add black writers to the curriculum. Regarding gender: Find female, writers and thinkers worth reading. Praise diversity and think the problem is solved. Regarding class: Add labour history. See the world from perspectives of those who laboured to grow food, build cities, teach children, heal the sick.

The further we push in telling an alternative story the more it generates critique and even revulsion when we confront the silences, the deceit, the theft, the exploitation. It is good to learn of Hypatia of Alexandria, but such women who managed to find a foothold in higher knowledge were of a privileged class and it doesn't really solve the problem of the silences on the stage of history. Finding some female or black thinkers in history to add to the story is good, but does not redress the absence of my class, my gender and others' race from the production of higher knowledge. We are descended from a great silence. How many black women cleaning South African universities over the decades might have had the capacity to study, to teach, to write? This we shall never know.

Such realisation leads to rage against epistemicide, to negation of the whole edifice of Eurocentric patriarchal capitalist knowledge, to reinterpretation of the whole of history from an Afrocentric or feminist point of view, to affirmation of a new *modus operandi* based on racial or gender specificity. There are a number of historical movements I could cite in how all this has played out: Proletkult in the early years of the USSR, the Maoist cultural revolution in the 1960s, certain forms of Afrocentrism and radical feminism today.

One recent and relevant example is Rhodes Must Fall leading to Fees Must Fall on South African campuses in 2015-2016. From the first day I set foot on the University of Cape Town campus in 2001, I was appalled by the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, its presiding position on the campus and the lack of contestation of this. Rhodes was a symbol not

only of white supremacy, but of colonial conquest, capitalist expropriation, ruthless class rule. Every time I passed it, I cringed. One day I heard a UCT student – a black female student – showing incoming students around campus, stopping at the Rhodes statue and explaining “We honour him for giving us all this”. I wanted to scream that it was not his to give and ask how she could be so blinded by false consciousness. Of course, it was not my place to do that.



I constantly raised the question of Rhodes with various colleagues at UCT and even comrades in the SACP, none of whom seemed so agitated about it as I was. They agreed with my critique of Rhodes, but said it was only a statue and it didn't matter so much. I thought of what I would like to see happen to it. Options of smashing it or putting it in a museum had their merits, but what I thought would be a good idea would be to contextualise it, to build around it a representation of the whole class structure of the Cape Colony over which he so oppressively presided. Nobody seemed very interested in the idea.

When I heard of Rhodes Must Fall, I was delighted. I followed them on various media from a distance. If I had been in Cape Town, I would have rushed out to support them. I was especially impressed that these activists made the point that it was about more than the statute, that it was connected to demands for a drastic decolonisation of the curriculum. There were occupations and teach-ins and a radical raising of consciousness of those involved. There was probing of the relation between race, class and gender. There was support for workers' demands on outsourcing, wages and working conditions on campus.

Since I first came, I was fascinated by South African universities and the jolting juxtapositions I encountered. The whole UCT campus was a *mélange* of mixed signals, of unreflective and unresolved contradictions, of ragbag eclecticism as well as considered syntheses. The names of buildings honoured oppressors and oppressed alike. You could walk from the Steve Biko building across the Cissie Gool Plaza to the Oppenheimer library to the Otto Beit building. You could see a mural celebrating education for women in Africa and a series of paintings depicting UCT in struggle. You could attend a lecture on poverty in the Nedbank room and study environmental science in the Shell building. These were not just names and symbols, of course, but a reflection of real forces in motion in unresolved contradictions in the university and society. Subsequent re-naming has brought buildings named for Neville Alexander, AC Jordan and Sara Bartmann and a chair named for Archie Mafeje.

I took photos of a series of paintings by Keresemose Richard Baholo, the first black student to receive a masters of fine arts degree at UCT, which caught my eye. They showed the liberation struggle as it played out at UCT over the decades: images of poor people demanding entry to doors of knowledge, earlier students protesting at the statue of Rhodes, Mandela receiving an honorary doctorate at UCT.



I saw RMF in the tradition of these radical impulses at UCT. Baholo supported RMF. I could not understand it when I saw his paintings in a photo of paintings on UCT campus burnt by RMF. <sup>2</sup>



Photo by Ashleigh Furlong

I could understand why they burned portraits of Jan Smuts and Edward, Prince of Wales, but why these paintings? I raised this question at a lecture I gave in Cape Town and one of those responsible arose to say that she would not explain it.

Although I was impressed by RMF, there were more problematic aspects that began to emerge. For some, the realisations brought revulsion and demanded destruction. The inclusive beginning gave way to tendencies to racial essentialism and separatism, negation of intellectual achievements and burning of public property, even progressive art. They were contemptuous of previous generations of struggle. They expelled white comrades from meetings. They were dismissive of “white Marxism”. Even Ngugi wa Thiongo, who had been calling for decolonisation of the mind for decades, was treated with disrespect when he came to speak in South Africa at this time. <sup>3</sup>

So what to do with this realisation and revulsion? Must every black person condemn every white person for every manifestation of racism and colonialism since the beginning of time? Must every woman hold every man accountable for every act of patriarchy and misogyny? Must every person to come from the working class reject any contribution to the struggle against the injustices of class rule from anyone born into a privileged class position? Including Marx, Engels, Lenin.

There is a difference between justified rage against injustice and an indiscriminating and unjustified backlash. Moreover, it will not lead to genuine liberation. It might set out to find a road to a just society, but it will not go there. It is a blind alley. It is seeking decolonisation of the mind, but it will sink into a nihilistic swamp. Fanon saw negritude, a retreat into past African glories, an emphasis on race and culture as opposed to class and socio-economic structures, as a black hole.

So how to proceed toward a decolonisation of the university? Do we reject all existing knowledge and start again at year zero? Do we idealise our own ancestors as earth mothers or sun people or salt of the earth workers, as bearers of sagacity that will be the key to our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives? Specifically, what to do with the intellectual inheritance of the ages? What to do with the history of knowledge as it has come down to us?

Donna Haraway articulated the dilemma of feminists faced with canonical knowledge: *“Modern feminists have inherited our story in a patriarchal voice. Feminists have inherited knowledge through the paternal line. The word*

*was Aristotle's, Galileo's, Bacon's, Linnaeus's, Darwin's; the flesh was woman's. . . feminists have now entered the debates on the nature and power of scientific knowledge with authority."*<sup>4</sup>

So the third step in this dialectic is transformation. As I see it, the history of civilisation, the history of culture, the history of science, this knowledge may have been produced from an oppressive division of labour by class, race and gender, from a gulf between those who ruled and wrote from above and those who laboured from below to feed, clothe and shelter them, but through this our species has evolved and produced what imperfect forms of civilisation and knowledge we have. That legacy belongs not only to those who designed the buildings, wrote the books and conducted the experiments, but to those who gave birth and tilled the soil and built the cities. The civilisation that has been built – the cities, the schools and universities, the hospitals, all the advances in science and technology – all these belong to those who laboured from below without whom nothing could have happened.

I don't renounce Aristotle, Galileo or Shakespeare, but I see them in socio-historical context and take from them what is of value within my transformed world view. It is irrational and nihilistic to denounce anything ever produced by dead white European males, which also includes Marx, Engels, Bukharin, Gramsci, Caudwell. That knowledge of the past cannot just be taken as it is, but analysed, criticised and re-contextualised to construct a new synthesis. The dominant historiography of knowledge must be scrutinised and transcended to tell a more inclusive, integrated and complex story. The story of the oppressed must be foregrounded so that the history of colonialism is seen from the perspective of the colonised to construct a history that is more honest, more complex, more inclusive.

The lived experience of marginalised people has epistemic value and should have its place in the university curriculum, but should not be exempt from the demands of logic, evidence, contextualisation and perspective. It should be set upon sound theoretical foundations. It should not be the case that experience is female and theory is male or that experience is black and theory is white.

In this process of transformation, I think that much has been achieved in making space for gender and race, although not so much for class. We need to defend those achievements, which are coming under attack from the right who caricature these efforts as "grievance studies". However, we can defend these achievements most effectively by a robust critique of those manifestations which make it easy to caricature.

Out-of-focus identity politics, especially those based on overblown micro-grievances of the privileged, in safe spaces fenced off with trigger warnings, divert attention and resources from the more seriously oppressed. A reduction of comrades or colleagues who have something to contribute to a common cause to allies who must be silent and follow orders is neither progressive nor productive. You would think sometimes that the problem with the world is the very existence of white heterosexual cis males.

It is vital to rise above myopic separatism, to see each thing in the fullness of its interactions. Intersectionality theory is a move to articulate the interconnections by calling attention to the ways that race and gender and class and other factors intersect, but tends to understate the role of class. It is ungrounded insofar as it fails to name the system shaping all such intersections. Similarly, privilege theory tends to be concerned with confronting individuals to measure their inherited position on a moral calculus designed by those engaging in a race to the bottom to win the prize of being designated most oppressed – or often relatively privileged descended from the most oppressed.

Only Marxism names the system and is capable of conceptualizing the totality of forces in their interactions with each other. I have engaged with the culture wars of recent decades and often felt exasperated at the one-sided caricatures in combat with each other. In the science wars, for example, what was too often missed was the synthesis that the Marxist tradition had long brought to bear on these dilemmas, affirming simultaneously the cognitive power of science as well as its socio-historical embeddedness and ideological dimensions.

This meme, circulated without attribution on Facebook, articulates brilliantly how out of focus so much of current thinking is about class, race and gender.



Why is there so much emphasis on gender, race and ethnicity at expense of class? Capitalism can accommodate increased focus on gender, race and ethnicity. Indeed, it must, because it is a complex system that needs to harness the skills of the previously excluded in terms of gender, race and ethnicity and even class, but the pressure is for that participation to be in the direction of assimilation. What the system cannot accommodate is a transformation of mode of production, distribution and exchange and this is why analysis of class is off the agenda for our ever more market-oriented universities, ever more colonised, not by states, but by capital. Capitalism is the most powerful force determining our possibilities of life. A person's relation to the means of production, distribution and exchange structures their access to material resources, physical health, psychological well-being and advanced knowledge. Only Marxism is capable of synthesis, of contextualising each thing in relation to the others, of seeing the pattern of interaction of all forces in motion, of finding a way forward from the morass of the moment. We have to find our way within capitalism to something beyond it. This means always thinking systemically.

In working out how we relate to what has come to us from the past in making our way in the present, there is all the difference between serious syntheses and flaccid affirmations or opportunist eclecticism.

It is one thing to find something of value in Aristotle and see no problem in a university being named after him in Thessaloniki, but Rhodes is another matter. It does not solve the problem of Rhodes to add Mandela and come up with the Mandela Rhodes Foundation. A UCT student was awarded a Mandela Rhodes scholarship to study for an MPhil in intercultural and diversity studies and said that he believed that the scheme was "designed for individuals who have in them a little Mandela and a little Rhodes".<sup>5</sup> The very existence of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation symbolises the glossing over of glaring contradictions. It is one kind of response to agenda of transformation, but it is not based on a genuine synthesis. As Mandela framed it: "The bringing together of these two names represents a symbolic movement in the closing of the historic circle; drawing together the legacy of reconciliation and leadership and that of entrepreneurship and education."<sup>6</sup>

In response, I ask: What about the legacy of subjugation, of deceit, of silence, of theft, of poverty, of murder? How can this be reduced to entrepreneurship and education? What about the legacy of struggle, of longing for liberation, of striving for justice, of demanding redistribution of wealth? How can this be reduced to leadership and reconciliation?

I came to South Africa looking for transformation of academic knowledge within the context of the transformation of society. I explored the promises and processes that have enveloped South African universities in recent decades. I focused on the underlying assumptions shaping academic disciplines in the humanities, the debates contesting them

and the social-political-economic movements encompassing them. I traced the impact of Marxism, Africanism, postmodernism and neoliberalism on the production of knowledge. I found much evidence of decolonising transformative thinking in South African universities and in the liberation movement during the struggle against apartheid, especially due to the strong influence of Marxism at this time.

Contrary to my expectations, it seemed more vibrant during the struggle against apartheid than in the post-apartheid period. A number of intellectuals who once articulated coherent positions as part of a collective struggle have been overpowered by neoliberalism, decentered by postmodernism, and demobilised by a movement for liberation transmuted into a party of power.

My conclusion was that South African universities are caught up in a complex field of forces where they are subject to conflicting pressures. The result is a state of contradictory transformations – one stemming from the politics of liberation and the other from the demands of the global market. South Africa has been swept along in global tides and it often seems as if the latter predominates.

Although the intellectual ferment of the liberation movement has dissipated, I don't think it has disappeared. During my most interval in Africa, I found a new wave of serious thinking and mobilising on issues of decolonization going beyond political decolonisation, long achieved, to the whole range of unresolved matters, from epistemology to economics, where it has yet to be achieved. In this, there is hope for a better future.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the Mzala Nxumalo Memorial Lecture I gave at University of Johannesburg on 14 February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/paintings-burnt-include-ones-black-artists/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/925234/ngugi-wa-thiongos-lessons-for-south-african-students-fell-on-deaf-ears/>

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge 1990, p72

<sup>5</sup> Buhle Zuma *Monday Paper* UCT 11-15 December 2006, p3

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Mandela Mandela Rhodes Foundation website <http://www.mandelarhodes.org/> 2006