

Development Studies

Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization

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Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni penned *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (2018). Being a top decolonial theorist with over a hundred reviews in the fields of African History, African Politics, and African Development, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is Professor and Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South with Emphasis on Africa at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. Before this position, he worked as Research Professor and Director of Scholarship in the Department of Leadership and Transformation (DLT) of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor's Office at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and also as Acting Executive Director of the Change Management Unit (CMU) in the Vice-chancellor's Office at the same university, Director of Scholarship at CMU, and founding Head of the Archie Mafeje Research Institute for Applied Social Policy. He is also the founder of the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) based at the University of South Africa. He is in addition a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated social scientist, a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), a Fellow of the African Studies Centre (ASC) in the Netherlands, and a Research Associate at the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies at The Open University in the United Kingdom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Born in the 1960s, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is a Zimbabwean national who comes from the discipline of Historical and African Studies. Holding a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in History degree, a Masters of Arts in African History degree, and Doctor of Philosophy in Historical Studies degree (all from the University of Zimbabwe), he also possesses a Post-Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Teaching from the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and a certificate in Research Supervision from Monash University in Australia. He has authored over a hundred publications (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

As a result of his significant scholarly contributions, he has been recognized as a member of different bodies. They include Advisory Board Member of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC); Board Member of the Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (Next Gen) Program; Advisory Editorial Board Member for the Ubuntu Dialogues Project, a Collaboration between Michigan State University's African Studies Center and Stellenbosch University Museum at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa; and Member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Developing Societies* (JDS) published by Sage Publications. He has also received many awards that include the one from Le Monde Afrique for being among the ten greatest thinkers on decolonizing African thought for the purpose of the emancipation of Africa, the Ali Mazrui Award for Scholarship and Research Excellence offered by the Board of Toyin Falola

International Conference on Africa and the Diaspora, and the University of Zimbabwe Book Prize for academic excellence in both coursework and examinations at the Bachelors of Arts Honors Level Part III (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's teaching interests are in Epistemologies of the Global South, Decolonial/Postcolonial Theory, African Intellectual/Ideological History, African Studies, African History, Development Studies, International Studies, International Relations, African Political Economy, and Imperial and Colonial History. His research interests include Decolonization/decoloniality/postcoloniality; knowledge and transformation of higher education; African political economy and African development; epistemologies of the Global South; race, ethnicity and politics of identity; mobility, migration and planetary human entanglements; African intellectual history and Black/African political/social thought; Pan-Africanism, nationalism and decolonization; and empire, imperialism and colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Book Review

The central thesis broached in this book by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) is that in order to understand the contemporary challenges facing Africa and its development, the continent must be treated as a “legitimate historical unit of analysis” and an “epistemic site” from which the world is to be scrutinized. Simultaneously, according to the author, knowledge from Africa must be globalized in order to achieve “ecologies of knowledges.” This twin approach, he says, will facilitate both the “deprovincializing of Africa” and in turn the “provincializing of Europe.” The author therefore argues that Africa can gain cultural, economic, political and other liberties only when the challenge of epistemic freedom has been tackled.

Splitting up the book into ten chapters, the author goes on to lend credence to his thesis. The opening chapter titled “Introduction: Seek Ye Epistemic Freedom First” commences by stating the purpose of the book: i.e. to examine how Africans strive to free themselves epistemically from cognition polity. Next, the chapter discusses the long-term effects of colonialism, enslavement and modernity, and how Africans have been turned into “agents of a Eurocentric history.” Thereafter, the chapter shows that what exist today as conventional “philosophy of history” and academic discourse of history produced within modern universities continue to be “Eurocentric, neo-Enlightenment, neo-Hegelian, neo-Marxist, neo-modernist and Habermasian” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 2).

The second chapter, “Nomenclature of Decolonization,” discusses the staying power of colonialism in Africa despite the fact that direct administrative mechanisms have been taken apart. It talks about the difference between “coloniality” and “postcolonialism” as the former not being an “after” of colonialism, since it is a continuation of the phenomenon. It then demonstrates that “coloniality” has survived globally and manifests itself ideationally, institutionally, metaphysically, and physically. The backlash is “decoloniality,” which is defined as “a collective name for all those anti-slavery, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, anti-patriarchy, anti-Eurocentric hegemonic epistemology initiatives and struggles emerging in different geo-political sites haunted by coloniality” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 44).

The third chapter named “The Onto-Decolonial Turn” deals with the concept, which the author describes as comprising “ontological” and “decolonial” turns. The “onto-decolonial turn,” he says, is a result of anger and hate displayed in the political arena and social media. This development is said to exacerbate exploitation, inequality, oppression and racism (Ndlovu-

Gatsheni, 2018).

The fourth chapter, “Reconstituting the Political,” interrogates whether the New Testament “Christian turn” offensive that targeted the Old Testament/Judaic/Abrahamic/Roman Christendom embedded in rigidified Hebrew traditions and the ossified fundamentalist laws presided by an uncompromising and vengeful God has led to a “decolonial reconstitution” of the political and basically redefine humanity in non-separatist terms and launched a new order of “decolonial love” (love thy neighbor as you love yourself). The proposition proffered here is that in this decolonized milieu, giving another chick to those still stuck in the paradigm of war and violence is representative of the ending forever the “eye-for-an-eye” barbaric warrior tradition (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The fifth chapter dubbed “Reinventing Africa” explores how the colonial historical circumstances propelled Africans to “reinvent” their continent and develop “Africanity.” The key variables analyzed here from an African-centered perspective are (a) ancestors, (b) culture, (c) history, (d) knowledge, and (e) language. These variables are deemed quite necessary for remembering the process of divide and rule and dehumanization Africans had to endure during colonization. As a result, intellectual- and identity-formation are inseparable for Africans in their pursuit of epistemic liberty (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The sixth chapter, “Epistemic Legitimacy of Africa,” explicates why the knowledge arena is a venue of long-term epistemic battles, which were and continue to be linked to battles over ontological issues. The major argument in the chapter is that epistemology, ontology, and scholarship were all distorted by racism at the same time. Racism during colonialism and imperialism not only dehumanized people as beings but also African knowledge systems, thereby depriving humanity of these great resources. The lingering effects of this racism include (a) “the invasion of the mental universe of the colonized world”; (b) “the inscription of the debilitating Hegelian master-servant dialectic of Europe as the abode of knowers (teachers/civilizers of the world) and Africa as a dwelling of ignorant and primitive sub-human species”; (c) “Europe as the originator of things and Africa as the imitator”; and (d) “Europe as source of science and rationality and Africa as ‘Dark Continent’ engrossed in magic and superstition” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 125).

The seventh chapter called “Education/University in Africa” looks at the major part played by the “modern Westernized university” in the invention and universalization of the “colonizer’s model of the world.” Presented here is a historical account of this manifestation. It begins with the spread and naturalization of “imperial reason” and ends with the justification for the “genocides, ontolocides, epistemicides, culturecides and linguicides committed by the imperial/colonial foot soldiers on the ground” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 162).

The eighth chapter, “National Question,” offers an explanation for why this query became contested among different intellectuals and nationalists. Answers are gleaned from the methods used by colonialists to suppress nationalist sentiments toward wider national identities as they emphasized “tribalism” over “nationalism.” Nonetheless, it was colonialism itself that ushered the notion of the “modern nation-state” as a social organization of human life in Africa. Its formation on the continent, however, was to serve the colonial project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The ninth chapter designated “Rhodes Must Fall” retells how Cecil John Rhodes, a leading British imperialist of his time, tried to bring into reality his imperial ambition to colonize the entire Africa and make it a British colony. The chapter points out that after more than a century, the notorious racist continues to live in the form of (a) “memorials and statues,” (b) “a university

that is named after him (Rhodes University in Grahamstown),” (c) “a prestigious scholarship known as the Rhodes Scholarship,” (d) “a Rhodes Professorial Chair of Race Relations at Oxford University,” and (e) “a Foundation known as Mandela-Rhodes Foundation that conjoined the name of a leading African ‘decolonial’ fighter.” The author therefore calls for the elimination of the reminders of the racist (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The tenth and final chapter titled “Conclusion: African Futures” talks about the emergence of the concept of “modernity” in epistemic battles. The questions that come up in the exploration are (a) “Who was modern?” “What does it mean to be human?” “Who belonged to the future?” “What constituted knowledge?” “How was society to be organized?” “How was power to be conceived and configured?” For the Europeans, they believed that they belong to the future. In order to buttress their claim, Europeans colonized space, people, knowledge and, more importantly, time, which they forked into the “pre-modern” and the “modern.” As a way to maintain this notion of time, Euro-modernity invented such nomenclatures as “indigenous,” “tribe,” “primitive,” and “black” as it distinguished those who claimed to be modern (to be in the future) while confining other human beings to the past—primitivity/backwardness (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Book’s Greatness

This book’s greatness was detected from a couple of facets. To begin with, the book has gotten a large amount of mentions. A concentrated Google search with the title of the book within quotation marks to rule out unnecessary sources on July 12, 2022 produced about 4,760 results in 0.63 seconds. Also, a search on Google Scholar on the same day showed 320 citations. In addition, on Amazon.com (2021), the book has received 7 global ratings averaging 4.8 out of 5 stars, with 5 stars (80%) and 4 stars (20%).

Next, the book has been well reviewed and applauded by erudite experts. These thinkers include Ramon Blanco of *International Affairs*; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States of America; Walter D. Mignolo, William H. Wannamaker Professor and Director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University in the United States; Mahmood Mamdani at the Makerere Institute of Social Research in Uganda and Columbia University in the United States; Nelson Maldonado-Torres at Rutgers University in the United States; Souleymane Bachir Diagne at Columbia University in the United States; and Toyin Falola at The University of Texas at Austin in the United States and Benue State University in Nigeria (for details, see Amazon.com, 2021).

The most significant review of the book within the context of Ndlovu-gatsheni’s larger work is embedded in the article titled “Decolonization, Decoloniality, and the Future of African Studies: A Conversation with Dr. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni” (2020) written by Duncan Omanga, who is an officer of the African Peacebuilding Network and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa program and also an alumnus of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies in Germany. Omanga makes many salient points about the book. First, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is noted to bringing clarity to the meaning of coloniality and how scholars are to differentiate this from decolonization and decoloniality. This is said to be very important because there exists a great deal of interest on questions of coloniality, colonization, colonialism, decolonization, and decoloniality, although these are not novel questions. He is perceived as preferring to talk about these concepts in relation to “resurgences” and “insurgencies” of radical African decolonial

thought and radical Black tradition. These radical influences, it is said, have put pressure on African scholars to clarify colonization, colonialism, coloniality, decolonization, and decoloniality (Omanga, 2020).

Second, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is acknowledged to explore in his book the three concepts that underlie coloniality—(1) “coloniality of power,” (2) “coloniality of knowledge,” and (3) “coloniality of being”—and their implication to African Studies and the study of Africa. It is pointed out that the units of analysis—i.e. “power,” “knowledge,” and “being”—are “conceptual gifts” from the Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Project which he finds to be quite useful. Regarding these concepts’ implications for African Studies, it is observed that he believes that scholars have to rethink African Studies within the context of the broader global coloniality of knowledge. Consequently, the implication of this crisis for African Studies is that Africanists cannot continue to draw upon concepts from the Northern epistemologies, which are exhausted. They must look for concepts from the epistemologies of the Global South that are still generative of new concepts and nouns (Omanga, 2020).

Third, it is mentioned that Zimbabwean scholar Simukai Chigudu presented a paper titled “Blind-Spots: Or Is It Ethical for White People to Study Africa?” at an African Studies conference convened in 2020. In the paper, Chigudu is noted as proffering that African Studies is founded on Western epistemologies and dominated by voices disengaged and distant from the realities of Africa. It is added that these “blind spots” have sometimes led to “evasion, misrepresentation, and self-deception.” At the center of his argument is the noted blistering critique of the role of non-African scholars in the epistemological development of the field. Thus, as the debate on the epistemic decolonization of African Studies continues, it is believed that there is a risk of the entire project getting muddled in racial politics. The answer to this situation in Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s book is that racism is a reality in knowledge, power configurations and dynamics. Thus, according to him, race in the knowledge domain authorizes comparative studies with Europe as the template, and against which others are being gauged. He is noted as reminding us that “It was race that was mobilized and deployed in the very processes of social classification of people and their corresponding imagined differential ontological densities. There emerged the very colonization of being human into ‘human’ and ‘subhuman’” (Omanga, 2020, p. 1).

Fourth, also alluded to is the 2018 African Studies Association (ASA) presidential lecture, where Jean Allman gave a lecture that narrated the historical and continuing marginalization of Black scholars in African Studies and revealed how the field became dominated by White men. Omanga further mentions that after giving the same lecture in Edinburgh, there was an extended debate, late into the evening, on how scholars can move these revolutionary debates into tangible, actionable work. He therefore raises the question about the danger of decolonization becoming a mere trend or another academic buzzword. He credits Ndlovu-Getshani to have anticipated such a risk in his book. Accordingly, he is acknowledged as having pointed out that “Decolonization has to remain a revolutionary term with theoretical and practical value. If it is immediately embraced by everyone and it’s easily on the lips of everyone, there is a danger it might transform into a buzzword and a metaphor” (Omanga, 2020, p. 1).

Fifth, and finally, Ndlovu-Gatsheni is lauded for identifying in his book “what and who” the biggest impediments to the realization of the aspirations of decolonization are. He is said to indicate that the greatest impediments to decolonization are the very people who are supposed to lead the decolonial struggle because they are products of colonization. Accordingly, he is also noted to suggest that there is a necessity for these people to first liberate themselves before they

can do anything meaningful, as the endeavor requires a lifelong relearning process (Omanga, 2020).

Conclusions and Recommendations

One conclusion that we draw from the findings in the preceding sections is that the field of Development Studies is quite multiplex. Not only does Ndlovu-Gatsheni's book reveal that African writers on the continent's development come from different academic fields, so are the theories and methodologies employed to study development. Another conclusion is that the Eurocentric approaches that have dominated the field are deemed inadequate in many respects when it comes to investigating Africa's development. The other conclusion is that Africa has a great deal of indigenous knowledge to inspire development that needs to be effectively tapped and, thus, is not the "hopeless continent" some Eurocentric and Afro-pessimist writers have deemed it to be.

Thus, two recommendations are made here. First, writers on African development must come up with African-centered approaches for investigating the phenomenon, and policymakers and practitioners in the field must likewise come up with home-grown remedies to ameliorate Africa's development challenges and promote it. Second, writers, policymakers and practitioners must realize that the concepts of development, democracy and peace are very much intertwined, as the lack of development has often been linked to the failure of political participation and the prevalence of conflict.

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