



# UNSETTLING EUROPEAN EPISTEMOLOGIES MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF PARADIGMS FROM THE SOUTH

*Harikrishnan Gopinathan Nair*

“Y así entre todos logran, lo que era un imposible  
que todo el mundo sepa, que el Sur también existe”

## **Abstract**

This paper aims to discuss the Epistemologies from the South. For that, not only the thinking of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, but also Immanuel Wallerstein and Claude Alvares is studied. At the same time, a relationship is set between this theory and the Indian, Afro-Cuban and the Meso-American societies.

## **Keywords:**

Epistemologies of the South. Paradigms of the South. Societies of the South.

## **EPISTEMOLOGIAS EUROPÉIAS INQUIETANTES: MAPEAMENTO DOS CONTORNOS DOS PARADIGMAS DO SUL**

## **Resumo**

Esse artigo busca discutir as Epistemologias do Sul. Para tanto, não é estudado apenas o pensamento de Boaventura de Sousa Santos, mas também de Immanuel Wallerstein e Claude Alvares. Ao mesmo tempo, um relacionamento é traçado entre essa teoria e as sociedades indiana, afro-cubana e meso-americana.

## **Palavras-Chave**

Epistemologias do Sul. Paradigmas do Sul. Sociedades do Sul.

## **PART I**

I would like to talk about Epistemologies from the South, or Southern epistemologies, or *Epistemologias sur-sur*. Although I was interested in the politics of knowledge production, distribution, and consumption for quite a few years now, I became involved in this subject three years ago, when I came across a study by Claude Alvares – an Indian scholar from Goa, which is a former Portuguese colony on the West coast of India.

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· Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani.

In 2011, Alvares published a study titled “A critique of Eurocentric Social Science and the question of alternatives” in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (28 May 2011). His central argument was that although scholars do accept that Eurocentric epistemology has indeed a dominant presence in the Humanities and Social Sciences, little is done to challenge it. I wanted to verify his claim, and therefore I began a research project on exploring how scholars in the South - in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – have indeed challenged Euro-American epistemologies in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

However, I noted that despite original and exciting scholarship from the South, these have failed to influence the traditional disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences across the world unless it passes through the transit points in the North. The trajectory of the knowledge economy is analogous to international air-travel. While travelling from Asia to America or vice versa, the easiest, and hence, the most feasible route is often via the North America or Europe. This asymmetry in the knowledge economy is partly because the circulation of knowledge through articles in journals, books by leading publishers, the traditional pedagogies and curricula in universities, and the new method of disseminating knowledge through Massive Online Courses are evidently controlled by the knowledge economy of the North while also being influenced by Euro American epistemologies, which are at times surreptitious and at other times less hidden.

In the course of this lecture, I would like to highlight salient aspects of the nature of the scholarship produced in the South that I have been profiling thus far. As I began working on this project, I also realized that some pioneering work on Southern Epistemologies has already been done by Immanuel Wallerstein and Boaventura Sousa Santos. Therefore, I would in good measure be looking at these issues from their shoulders as it would offer us a panoramic perspective. But, before I proceed further, let us rewind and take look at the arguments of Claude Alvares. His theses provide me a point of departure.

Alvarez noted that while people in the South tend to resist political and economic imperialism, there is very little resistance to academic imperialism. Academic scholars in the South are largely conservative and are often servile to northern epistemologies. This intellectual dependence is made worse because funding for research projects often originates in the developed world, and one who pays often determines the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of research conducted by the scholars in the South. Academic exchange programmes with fellowships to study in universities of the North have significantly influenced scholars in the Asia and Africa. Their research work is consequently based on Euro-American theoretical and methodological frameworks. Please allow me to enumerate some of the principal findings and conclusions of Claude Alvares.

UNESCO's *World Social Science Report* (2010) noted that social science research outside the non-Western world is so insignificant in quality that it is rarely cited.

The same report pointed out that North America cited zero research from Africa and Asia.

Knowledge still flows from apparently “advanced” cultures to “primitive” countries of the South, so many decades after the process of political decolonization began in Asia and Africa since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The struggle to occupy chairs in departments of world’s leading universities by scholars from the South are but small attempts in the struggle for epistemological independence as one is still caught up in the web of the same asymmetrical knowledge economy.

Universities in the South are merely upgraded versions of the factory school where categories, theories, and methodologies developed in America, Britain, France and Germany are regurgitated with little creativity and innovation. The time gap in the emulation of northern epistemologies was 20-25 years a generation ago but will be substantially reduced with the improvement in communication technology.

Two classes of people insist that Euro-American epistemes are superior: scholars of the North themselves and the academic community colonized by it. Nearly two centuries ago, the British colonial officer Thomas Macaulay, who devised English education for Indians said “[...] a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole of native literature of India and Arabia. [...] and when we pass from the works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the European becomes absolutely immeasurable.” Ngugi wa Thiongo again warned us of this cultural imperialism in his work *Decolonizing the mind* as did Edward Said in his *Orientalism*. The long term effect of cultural colonialism has been to annihilate indigenous languages, cultures, and knowledge systems; and consequently, it destroyed the confidence of peoples in the South.

Thus, degree programmes in philosophy of many African and Asian universities concentrate on studying European philosophers at the cost of others including their own. Even if non-Western philosophies are taught, it is often done using parameters from the West.

Claude Alvares then proceeded to minutely analyse the Euro-American nature of the traditional university disciplines of Sociology, Economics and Political Science. His analysis and conclusions resonate with those of Immanuel Wallerstein. I will not detain us here with the details of those arguments except with an invitation to engage with their work. I believe that that their arguments are substantially valid.

If you agree with me, you might also agree with the conclusion of Alvares. He says therefore that the primary agenda of non-Western academics ought to be a resistance to the academic imperialism in the form of transcending Eurocentric discourse in our perception and understanding of reality. This would inevitably lead to plurality but that would be infinitely more exciting than the asphyxiating and homogenous epistemes that are in vogue today.

## PART II

Mahatma Gandhi taught those of us Indians, who were willing to learn that freedom or swaraj from British rule did not mean throwing out the British and be-

coming like them. Swaraj or autonomy begins with the self and through education, but that struggle for freedom must necessarily be non-violent. It must be non-violent not because Gandhi believed that non-violence was pious. Rather, his non-violence or ahimsa was based on the philosophy of *anekantavada* – the episteme of a small religious community known as the Jains. The Jains believed that reality is many-sided. If one accepts that truth is not singular but plural, it is bound to reduce conflicts in thought and word, and consequently in deed as well.

One of the principal purposes of Southern Epistemologies is to bring to the fore actors, whose agency has been reduced to nothingness. In India, we have had the most inhuman and oppressive system of castes – based on notions of purity of blood and hierarchy perpetuated through endogamic marriages. The most radical challenge to that came from the B.R. Ambedkar, one of the principal architects of the constitution of the republic of India. Ambedkar chose to describe the so-called low castes, the untouchables, and the unseeables as Dalits. What is in a name one might ask? Everything is, at least, in this case. The word Dalit means broken down or ground down. By this using this form of auto-nomenclature, the question arises who has oppressed whom? The Dalit identity from the world itself points to the oppressor. It also brings forth the necessity for change through the agency of the oppressed. If Paolo Friere discovered a pedagogy of the oppressed so did Ambedkar in fighting the laws and customs of caste Hindus. Today, Dalit Studies is a major discipline of research and teaching in India.

If Ambedkar excavated and brought forth the oppressed category of caste, so did Fernando Ortiz for race, but as a cultural category rather than as a biological one. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian school of criminal anthropology led by Enrico Ferri and Cesare Lombroso had classified an entire race of people as criminal. Ortiz too initially held similar views with regard to Afro-Cubans. By with the passage of time, he began a serious endeavour of studying the music, dance, religion and culture of the Afro-Cubans. These studies ranged from the legal, criminological and penal through oral history and philology to economic history, sociology, ethnology, archaeology and anthropology.

What was most significant of this trajectory was the instance of intellectual moulting, when he shed his criminological perspective in studying Afro-Cuban society and focused on its cultural elements. This metamorphosis also aided the vindication of Afro-Cubans. In his studies on Afro-Cuban music, dance, religion and culture, Ortiz came to the conclusion that how the dominant classes in Cuba used terms such as “*mala vida*”, “*hampa afro-cubana*” and, adjectives like retrograde, savage, primitive, atavistic etc for continuously marginalizing the Afro-Cubans. The intellectual moulting of Ortiz gave rise to the concept of “*transculturación*”, with which he explained Cuban history as a complex process, wherein multiple cultures permanently interacted with each other. If Cuba was a microcosm of Latin America, what was true for Cuba could possibly be true for rest of the region as well.

What Ortiz did for people of African origin in Cuba, Jan Vansina – a Belgian historian, would do for people of the Congo. The aim of the discipline of history for a long time since Leopold van Ranke was to describe the past as it actually happened or study history objectively. For this, the emphasis was on sources that were almost

inevitably written documents. What about those people without writing? They had a past, but for historians peoples without written sources were people without history. At a time when leading universities in Europe and America did not study African history, Vansina evolved the method of writing history through oral traditions. His *Oral tradition* challenged fundamental episteme of history as it was understood until then.

In a like manner, challenges to traditional historiography also came from Miguel Leon Portilla around the same time. In the work *Vision de los vencidos* by Angel Garibay and Leon Portilla, the conquest of Mexico was relooked at from the perspective of the vanquished by a study of sources in Nahuatl. Their studies were launched within the scope of a seminar at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico titled *Seminario Nahuatl*, but a few decades later, it would transform into a separate degree-awarding university discipline of Estudios Mesamericanos. Nathan Watchtel would emulate this method for the study of the Incas. These works in historical scholarship would prove to be a shot in the arm in sphere of politics as the Native Americans were now endowed with agency that was denied to them for over five hundred years.

Encouraged by these developments in the academia Carlos Lenkersdorf took a step in a different direction. By studying the structure of Mayan languages, especially Tojolobal, he came to the conclusion that the language itself influenced how the Mayans perceived reality. Unlike the Indo-European languages with its pronounced subject-object dichotomy, Tojolobal minimized this dichotomy. The subject-object dichotomy leads to an emphasis of mine versus your. In Tojolobal, what stands out is the sense of us or *nostroismo* – an intersubjectivity.

Another namesake of his, Carlos Montemayor, questioned the tendency to consider the languages of hegemonic peoples as more developed, while relegating the languages of those less fortunate as mere dialects. He insisted that Nahuatl has a linguistic system as complete as German, and that Purépecha was comparable to Greek. Montemayor analysed the legal system of the indigenous communities of the Ramuris and the Tarahumaras and compared it with Western legal systems. In the former, disputes were resolved by the participation of the entire community not through retribution but rather through restitution and reparation. His studies made a case for integration of these indigenous legal systems into the national juridical system of individual Latin American states. In some measure, this has been realized in the Bolivian Constitution of 2008. If Western constitutionalism is being challenged in South America, similar changes are happening on the other side of the globe as well. One need only to take a look at the Bhutanese Constitution of the same year. All these developments echo the concluding verses of Mario Benedetti's poem *El sur tambien existe*: "[...] and thus between all is achieved, what was once impossible. Let the whole world know that the South indeed exists."

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