

Epistemologies, alternative

Christopher Balme

The term ‘alternative epistemologies’ generally refers to approaches to knowledge and understanding that diverge from or challenge mainstream or traditional, meaning Western, epistemological perspectives. While it’s difficult to pinpoint a specific origin for the term, it gained prominence in academic discourse, particularly in fields like philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, where scholars began to explore epistemological frameworks that depart from dominant Western paradigms. Within globalisation studies, the term stands for direct challenges to the dissemination of Western ways of thinking transported mainly by the imposition of European educational institutions. The formulation of ‘alternatives’ to these assumed ‘universal’ truths and ways of thinking are dis:connective in the sense that they pose challenges to such assumptions. This article will trace the evolution of the concept from its beginnings in Marxism and Feminism before focusing on the ‘global university’ as the site where alternative epistemologies are mainly contested, especially around calls to ‘decolonise the curriculum’. It will conclude with a brief discussion of indigenous epistemologies using the example of Māori language and culture in New Zealand universities.

The word ‘epistemology’ only enters philosophical language in the mid-19th century, initially as a translation of Fichte’s concept of *Wissenschaftslehre*. Until then the study of knowledge or the way knowledge is constituted and validated was either not considered a discrete branch of philosophy or it was folded into moral philosophy. While the term itself is a relatively recent coinage, the field is as ‘old as any in philosophy itself’ (Steup and Neta 2024). It covers questions of reason, justification, and more broadly the conditions of cognition. It is also the foundation of scientific and scholarly research.

Today ‘knowledge’, its formation and canonization, is one of the most central branches of interdisciplinary research intersecting with sociology, history of science, and with philosophy proper. The centrality of ‘knowledge’ as a subject of interdisciplinary research has been decisively influenced by the work of Michel Foucault whose concept of ‘episteme’ foregrounded the highly constructed and mutable nature of knowledge formations over time. In the more narrowly scientific fields, Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) concept of ‘paradigm shifts’ in scientific research also contributed to an acknowledgement of the relative nature of scientific knowledge formation and how it undergoes periodic realignments.

Marxism, Feminism and Negritude

If we take the article entitled 'Alternative epistemologies' by the Afro-Caribbean philosopher, Charles W. Mills (1988), as a point of departure, the first stage of discussion defined the key terms and frames of reference. Mills draws on three lines of thought which all posit the need for alternative epistemologies, albeit not always explicitly evoking the term. They are Marxism, Feminism (→ **Feminism**), and Black nationalism, mainly in the negritude tradition. These three approaches share the insight that 'the processes of cognizing validated by the dominant perspective are being characterized as somehow inadequate' (Mills 1988, 238).

According to Mills, all three critical traditions formulate a fundamental critique of established epistemological problems to the extent that they even reject the very framework of the discussion. They reject the 'paradigmatic cognizer, that familiar Cartesian figure, the abstract, disembodied, individual knower' and argue that certain issues are only problems 'because of the privileged universalization of the experience and outlook of a very limited (particularistic) sector of humanity – largely white, male, and propertied' (1988, 237–38).

Attempts to formulate alternatives to this totalizing construct can be grouped around three main arguments: 'the oppression subordinate groups suffer, their potentially universal character, their differential experience' (Mills 1988, 243). Mills identifies in the appearance/reality dichotomy formulated in Marx's *Capital* in connection with commodity fetishism an initial and highly influential social theory of an alternative epistemology. Feminist philosophy (Code 1981; Harding 1986; Haraway 1988) draws on this basic Marxist insight but replaces class with gendered experience that emphasizes forms of knowing inaccessible to the hegemonic male subject. Similarly, black subjects have access to forms of experience not available to white working-class male or female subjects. Mills also invokes Leopold Senghor's argument that emotion is central to African experience, 'which he virtually erects into a function of knowledge and attributes to the African as a cardinal principle of his racial disposition' (Mills 1988, 240). All three subordinate groups are linked by the experience of oppression, yet these experiences are not entirely commensurate with one another: 'It is not so much a question of simple oppression, then, but rather of an oppression so structured that epistemically enlightening experiences result from it' (246).

Postcolonial theories

While Mills may well be credited with coining the term 'alternative epistemologies', his frame of reference in the article remains philosophical and academic. Indeed, it is only around the turn of the 21st century that the term becomes reinvigorated and expanded beyond the confines of philosophy seminars and journals. The expansion begins with dissemination of postcolonial (→ **Postcolonial**) theory in the 1990s, the

reception of Latin American thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Walter Dignolo, and more recently with an interest in once ignored or repressed indigenous thought traditions.

Postcolonial theory provides the broad framework for discussing the ways in which colonialism has shaped and repressed non-Western knowledge systems by emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives and the decolonization of knowledge. Most famously, Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism* (1978), heavily influenced by Foucault, had an epistemological dimension, namely that orientalism as a 'style of thought' was a way of producing authoritative knowledge about the realm defined as the 'Orient'.

Although he does not explicitly invoke the term 'alternative epistemologies', Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty articulates in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) the ambivalence of European epistemology and its globalizing effects in the Global South: 'European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all – may be renewed from and for the margins' (2000, 16). Chakrabarty foregrounds a critique of Western education imposed through colonialism – via school and later university. It is here that the term intersects with the concept of globalisation in both affirmative and critical contexts. Broadly speaking, the concept of alternative epistemologies includes both the connective and dis:connective aspects of globalisation. On the one hand, the term 'epistemology' in its Western tradition is discussed throughout the academy. On the other, its putative universality makes it the subject of critique and resistance in different cultural contexts.

Latin American thinkers such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Walter Dignolo emphasize the dis:connective aspects of these processes which reach back to the early period of colonization. They argue for the necessity to formulate alternative epistemologies for the Global South in terms that resonate directly with dis:connective perspectives on globalisation. In his books *Epistemologies of the South* (2014) and *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (2018), de Sousa Santos defines the term 'epistemologies of the South' as concerning 'the production and validation of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy' (2018, 1). In this focus on oppression, he remains within the coordinates defined thirty years earlier by Mills, but, in contrast to the latter, provides examples of actual alternatives. His concept of a 'sociology of absences' explores realms of subaltern experience that lie beyond the established traditions and dichotomies of the Global North with the aim of 'turning absent subjects into present subjects as

the foremost condition for identifying and validating knowledges that may reinvent social emancipation and liberation' (2018, 4). This is a multi-sided and -sited undertaking which seeks to revalidate suppressed knowledges and their means of transmission. This may be through orality, embodied experience or redefining what is meant by authorship in collective contexts. He also points to concrete examples of local/indigenous concepts being integrated into mainstream institutional contexts. Examples given include *ubuntu* in South Africa 'co-being in coexisting ("I am because you are")' (2018, 5), which played a key role in the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in constitutional jurisprudence in the country. In the Latin American context, he cites the inclusion of concepts from indigenous languages such as *sumak kawsay* from Quechua, or the Inca deity *Pachamama* in the laws of Ecuador and Bolivia. The latter, he argues, represents 'a non-Cartesian, non-Baconian conception of nature', nature and human beings are accorded the same legal status (2018, 5). These examples demonstrate that the movement to formulate concepts that contest or co-exist with European notions of knowledge is a global one although the examples are local.

The global university and its discontents

The site where alternative epistemologies are most vigorously discussed and contested is the university where widespread calls to 'decolonize the curriculum' have gained considerable traction in recent years. This discussion ranges from pragmatic attempts to revise reading lists to much more fundamental calls for a 'decolonial' epistemology (→ **Postcolonial**), forming 'the rallying cry for those trying to undo the racist legacies of the past' (Mbembe 2015, 8). In his paper, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive' (2015), Achille Mbembe formulates a wide-ranging critique of South African universities in particular but some of his arguments can be extended more generally to what could be broadly called the neo-liberal university which sees in tertiary education a wealth-generator. The latter is a critique that applies to large sections of tertiary education across the globe, especially in the anglophone world. I shall focus here on those parts of his argument that pertain more narrowly to 'decolonizing the curriculum' and the colonial epistemological heritage.

Mbembe's critique is more comprehensible if we understand how global the institution of the university actually is. In their book *The University and the Global Knowledge Society* (2020), sociologists David Frank and John W. Meyer argue that the university is an institutional success story of the 20th century which increased exponentially and spread in largely isomorphic fashion across the globe including countries that were never colonized such as Japan. This isomorphism is based on a set of shared institutional beliefs, namely that the truths and facts produced at universities are universal and agreed upon wherever universities exist.

How can we, if at all, reconcile the ‘universalizing’ nature of the isomorphic university with calls which, in most cases, prioritize the local and would seem to question fundamentally the ‘cosmological’ foundations of the university as a place of unitary truth production and reproduction?

Mātauranga Māori/ Māori knowledge

There certainly exist examples of localized, alternative epistemologies being integrated into the university. All universities in New Zealand, for example, now host a traditional Māori *marae*, or meeting place, which is not just used for ceremonial purposes but is also a place of learning and a venue for conferences (the ceremonial *hui* is now used almost synonymously as a word for conference). This has no doubt been assisted by the fact that Māori language and culture are relatively unified, notwithstanding the importance of tribal affiliations. The first university-based *marae* was established at the University of Auckland in 1983 after considerable debate and controversy. It was followed by Victoria University in Wellington in 1986. Now most, if not all, New Zealand universities have integrated *marae* into their architecture and systems of teaching and research. All New Zealand universities sustain large Māori Studies departments which are supported by a vibrant network of Māori-language educational institutions from kindergarten to secondary school. Māori scholars have also formulated fundamental critiques which resonate beyond New Zealand. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s much cited book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), has impacted on thinking among indigenous scholars. Smith became one of the founding directors of Ngā Pae o Te Māramatanga, New Zealand’s Māori Centre of Research Excellence which brings together Māori researchers from a wide range disciplines and institutions. However, proposed changes to the school curriculum designed to ensure parity for mātauranga Māori with other bodies of knowledge sparked a controversy that began at Auckland University but eventually involved international voices such as Richard Dawkins and wider debates on merit versus identity politics in science (Abbot et al. 2023).

The importance of alternative epistemologies in the area of the performing arts was demonstrated by the reform of the New Zealand Drama School, the country’s national theatre academy. In the early 1990s, it was radically refashioned to absorb and accommodate Māori performance culture (Balme 2021). It is now better known by its Māori name, Toi Whakaari, and the curriculum is heavily influenced by Māori customs and protocol. The refashioning of this national conservatory as a bicultural training institution demonstrates how theatre training can be successfully decolonized. Although somewhat controversial at the time, it is now accepted practice.

Conclusion

From the brief account of a selection of voices cited above, the search for alternative epistemologies has been a guiding thread in a global discussion that emerges in the early 1970s in the triple context of Marxism, Feminism, and Black Consciousness and then spreads to the Global South, transported mainly by postcolonial theory and the ‘decolonial turn’ formulated by Latin American scholars. All attempts to critique existing epistemological assumptions operate mainly from a subaltern position vis-à-vis Western tradition. Today the discussion has left the confines of academic journals and is taking institutional form in some countries, where alternative concepts have found their way into jurisprudence and education.

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