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DOING PHILOSOPHY IN THE SOUTH: POLITICAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND ETHICAL STAKES

Philosopher au Sud: Enjeux politiques, institutionnels et éthiques

Filosofar no Sul: Problemáticas políticas, institucionais e éticas

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Abstract: This text is a presentation of the dossier that the reader has in hand. It historically situates some of the main difficulties that are common to non-Western teaching and research institutions working in the field of university philosophy. It briefly presents the seven articles that make up the dossier, elucidating the layers of analysis that each of the texts invites us to uncover, from different perspectives coming from different cultural, social and political contexts. The main focus of the seven contributions are on experiences from Cameroon and Brazil, but the arguments have implications for philosophical practices elsewhere too. Ultimately, the way in which the seven contributions come together gives rise to a rather peculiar interpretative horizon, which can provide different perspectives on the academic situation of philosophy in the countries of the “South”.

Keywords: Decolonization of epistemes, plural world, university practices, authenticity.

Résumé: Ce texte est une présentation du dossier que le lecteur a en main. Il situe historiquement quelques-unes des principales difficultés communes aux institutions d'enseignement et de recherche non occidentales travaillant dans le domaine de la philosophie universitaire. Il présente brièvement les sept articles qui composent le dossier, en élucidant les niveaux d'analyse que chacun des textes nous invite à découvrir, à partir de différentes perspectives issues de contextes culturels, sociaux et politiques différents. Les sept contributions se concentrent principalement sur les expériences du Cameroun et du Brésil, mais les arguments ont des implications pour les pratiques philosophiques dans d'autres pays également. Enfin, la manière dont les sept contributions sont concaténées donne lieu à un horizon interprétatif assez particulier, qui peut offrir différentes perspectives sur la situation académique de la philosophie dans les pays du « Sud ».

Mots-clés: Décolonisation des épistémé, monde pluriel, pratiques universitaires, authenticité.

Resumo: Este texto consiste na apresentação do dossiê que o leitor tem em mãos. Ele situa historicamente algumas das principais dificuldades que são comuns às instituições de ensino e de pesquisa não ocidentais que trabalham na seara da Filosofia universitária. Nele são apresentados brevemente os sete artigos que compõem o dossiê, elucidando as camadas de análise que cada um dos textos nos convida a desvendar, a partir de diferentes perspectivas oriundas de diversos contextos culturais, sociais e políticos. O foco principal das sete contribuições são as experiências de Camarões e do Brasil, mas os argumentos também têm implicações para as práticas filosóficas em outros países. Por fim, a maneira como as sete contribuições se concatenam faz surgir um horizonte interpretativo bastante peculiar, que pode fornecer diferentes olhares acerca da situação acadêmica da Filosofia nos países do “Sul”.

Palavras-chave: Decolonização das epistemes, mundo plural, práticas universitárias, autenticidade.

Introduction to the special issue

Present-day academics are the inheritors of complex histories. Regional and international events, often tumultuous and violent, shaped their countries, their institutions and their self-consciousness. This has significant bearing on how the academic practices of teaching and research are exercised today, exerting an ambiguous enabling-constraining effect on every academic's work.

All of this is particularly visible in countries outside of the West, on which this special edition of the *Revista Pensando* focuses. More specifically the texts gathered here aim at exploring the difficulties and potential of philosophy as part of academic, social and cultural life in these countries.

While the creativity of inquisitive people obviously plays an important role in the history of sciences, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes the role of colonization, conquest and predatory capitalism in the formation of universities and academic life in our countries (CASTRO-GÓMEZ 2008). The very practice of science – its teaching and research – was corroded from the inside, by visions of some people as inferior and irrelevant to history. Coupled with this, their lands and resources were often dealt with as available for the interests of the powerful few from the outside (CÉSAIRE 1955, MIGNOLO & WALSCH 2018). As a result, indigenous populations and, in some cases, the descendants of enslaved peoples, were considered objects of research, while their own capacity to generate knowledge was ignored. Universities undeniably played a significant role in giving countries of the “South” their modern shape, however, here “modernity” represents a very ambiguous heritage because of this corrosive baggage.

From this perspective, the dawn of independence held the promise of a complete overhaul of the sciences: thought starting out from recognizing the true humanity of all people, respect for cultural and linguistic difference, realignment of research and teaching with the real interests of people locally... What has become of these promises? Speaking of philosophy alone, one in effect notes the appearance of erudite academics, sensitive analysts of local affairs (MENDIETA 2003, WIREDU 2004). But this is far from the whole picture. Most visible is the pervasive effect of “epistemological filiation” (MUDIMBE 1988 or, in the case of Brazil, cf. ARANTES 1994) to Western philosophies, be they more oriented to Europe or more to the Anglo-American academia. Very often one gets the impression of a de facto undervaluation of local and indigenous authors, modes of thinking or concerns in our institutions. In many countries, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the persistent under-representation or absence of indigenous peoples, people of color and certain minorities among university staff.

We consider this undervaluation to be both undesirable and changeable. There is an urgent need to reflect on the causes of this state of affairs and the means to remedy it. Such reflection holds the promise not only of improving our practice as it is related to its social context, but also to stimulate exchange between philosophers working with similar problems all over the world and, finally, to make a contribution to the planetary circulation of philosophy from wherever each of us happens to be.

While motivated by this vision, we understand the complexity of the problem. How could one undo the corrosive history, without any resentment towards scientific methods and while maintaining part of the heritage, for instance, the institution of the university? While critiquing the stereotypical “othering” and Western chauvinism transmitted by philosophy, how can one avoid belittling our own predecessors who have learned from this tradition, and tried to redeploy it for the causes we pursue here? How can one advocate the place of the indigenous and the local in philosophy, without inadvertently adopting an essentializing, folkloristic view of contemporary societies? On the other hand, how does one practice philosophy of and for the people, as we know ourselves and our contemporaries today, but without fatalistically accepting the unjust forces that have shaped – and continue to shape – our lifeworlds? How can philosophy help to increase a critical social memory and self-understanding (MARQUES 2023), while pursuing a capacitating, dignifying effect on distorted societies?

In addition, this complex problem requires joint reflection on the plurality of experiences of philosophical practice, with a view to advance dialogue between countries of the “South”, but without excluding alliances with the “North” in a perverse vengeance of essentialism. To make these complex issues more concrete, we have identified a number of important lines of inquiry:

1. Given their importance in guiding our thinking on these issues, how are we to understand the categories of the local and the indigenous? How should contemporary philosophy relate to cultural heritage and tradition (Mbonda & Rondeau 2015), including the knowledges of the pre-colonial lifeworld?
2. The questions regarding philosophical practice have to be set within a critical historical perspective. Views on the relation between modernity and colonialization range from the conjunctive thesis (MIGNOLO & ESCOBAR 2007) to the disjunctive thesis (TÁÍWÒ 2010). A lot still has to be done to clarify the different forms of modernity/modernization (APPADURAI 1996, KNÖBL 2007) and the different forms of colonization and coloniality (PAUL & LEANZA 2020) as they relate to different modes of capitalism. But we also need to contextualize philosophical practice in post-independence politics, society and institutions. Exploring such issues would open a view to the persistent problems of race, class and forms of interiorized humiliation, overlapping as they often do (MUNANGA 2020).
3. We recognize that we are not the first generation of academics to grapple with these issues, so it is important to examine the contributions of our predecessors as well. Which philosophies, formalized or not, have been offered by our predecessors? How should these be incorporated into the curriculum? What can we learn about intellectual strategies like “cannibalism” (DE ANDRADE 1928) or “transfunctionalization” (EBOUSSI BOULAGA 1977)? Work in this direction will include a diagnostic of the Western heritage: which parts of it are hegemonic, and which parts can still be productively redeployed (DE SOUSA SANTOS 2014)?
4. Our undertaking is unquestionably permeated by normative concerns. This raises a range of questions, from the most meta-ethical to the most practical. In terms of which normative orientations do we reconsider philosophical practice? Terms such as self-affirmation, cognitive justice, the common good, radical democracy and protection of the environment come to mind, but need to be detailed. And how is one to understand the relation between philosophy – and the human and social sciences generally – and active engagement in response to these normative claims? Is education and contributions to public opinion making sufficient or should philosophers in their capacity as lecturers engage in structural changes or even in activism (ALMEIDA 2018, RIBEIRO 2019)?
5. Institutions connect us to students and facilitate our work, but their inertia exercises constraints on our practice and their authority structure often imposes self-censuring. We need diagnostics of these problems – be they inherited or of more recent making – and practical suggestions about how to turn institutions into instruments for facilitating our initiatives.
6. The more we underscore the importance of philosophy’s situatedness, the more our relation to philosophies that are otherwise situated from our own becomes a question. By which terms should we relate these divergent experiences and needs: universalism, pluriversalism, uniformity, generality, dialogue, hybridization...? How does one share views and find common questions, without essentializing the South and its peoples as all chauvinistic thought does?

Even if a single collection cannot hope to address, let alone exhaust, all these issues, we believe that the contributions in this special issue provide valuable food for thought. As mentioned above, we recognize that we are not starting from scratch, but that our ways of thinking are shaped by traditions of philosophy and scientific thought that we have inherited and still practice. We stand at the crossroads of an ambiguous heritage and our own initiative to do something with it. How can we alter the existing “epistemological filiation”, while at the same time serving a liberating initiative? One important avenue is to examine the possible contribution of cultural expressions that do not simply conform to an imposed model, whether in the form of pre-colonial or contemporary vernacular culture.

From this perspective, Natacha GALLUCCI considers the contribution that an attentive study of pre-colonial and/or vernacular culture can make to a decolonization of philosophy. Her article is entitled: “The encounter of philosophical enunciation in our America: geoculture and corporality in Günther Rodolfo Kusch”. In this contribution, she follows the work of Argentinian academic and philosopher Rodolfo Kusch as a guide to documenting and appropriating a contemporary way of conceiving philosophical creation based on its (geographical and symbolic) spatiality, which, in Latin American cultures, is notably marked by processes of colonization and depreciation of the historical roots of invaded peoples. This is not simply a matter of returning to another cultural source, but of enriching contemporary ways of thinking, not without sometimes explicitly borrowing Western philosophical ideas. Drawing on the bodily experience of dance, Gallucci also poses the question of the extent to which philosophy is capable of embracing and appropriating those ideas and human practices that are ostensibly least closely related to the academic discipline of philosophy.

Just as interested as Gallucci in what contemporary context-sensitive philosophers are able to do, Amélie Aristelle EKASSI, on the other hand, places us at the heart of the historical and social complexities of present-day academic work in a country like Cameroon. She also questions the divergent receptions of imposed, biased and/or inherited epistemic practices. Furthermore, she focuses on the institutional framework of knowledge practices in African countries. The state of (un-)freedom of these institutions has a direct bearing on the type of science that is practiced, on the problems that are considered important, and on teaching and research. In her assessment of the situation, she draws inspiration from Jacques Chatué. On the basis of his work, she advocates a transformation of epistemic practices in the direction of an ethic of humility, sincerity and efficiency, pursued not primarily by isolated authors, but as part of a “networked” [*réticulaire*] collaboration. This project is presented in the title of her contribution: “Towards a networked philosophy as prolegomenon to the decolonization of *epistémé*”.

Whereas Ekassi works on the institutional aspect of philosophy in a national context (with clear implications for other countries), Luis Thiago DANTAS focuses on the micro level of writing. His article “An Afro-diasporic philosophy based on fragmentary writings” draws on the subversive effect of popular language on institutionalized standard language. He argues for the possibility of subverting hidden, illegitimate domination in philosophical writing. In this sense, his advocacy of the value of “fragmentary writing” could be seen as a strategy of transfunctionalization in the spirit of Eboussi Boulaga. The question remains of how to coordinate these forms of writing with scholarly writing, in a way that recalls the question of colloquial culture and dance in Gallucci’s article.

Gallucci and Ekassi focus on formal or practical issues relating to philosophical practice, but the question of elaborating philosophical content is also included in their reflections. This is more clearly the angle of another contribution: that of Edit Ekodo MVONDO. Mvondo’s argument aims to make a contribution to “transgressive” writing (which Dantas has sought to link to philosophy in the vernacular). Mvondo’s article, “Decentred social sciences in Africa? Outline of the architectural method, the epistemology of transgression, and the dialectic of authenticity”, extends this problem of philosophy to other social sciences. In this sense, she echoes the institutional perspective proposed by Ekassi. Following in the footsteps of Dika Akwa Nya Bonambela, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga

and Jean-Marc Ela, Mvondo's analyses, respectively, of their architectural method, the dialectic of authenticity and the epistemology of transgression, trace a similar path from diagnosis to alternative practice – in other words, from historically formed constraint to gradual innovation – as argued by several authors in this special edition. The material presented by Mvondo probes a perplexing question: to what extent does transgression – or transfunctionalization – imply the affirmation of what is transgressed or transfunctionalized, be it aspects of culture, science or philosophy? To a certain extent, this assertion can really be affirmed. Yet recognizing this point does not mean giving up the search for alternatives, but requires a great deal of lucidity as to the starting conditions for this search.

In many ways, the connections between people in different parts of the world are highlighted in these articles. Harmful historical and contemporary geopolitical relations shape much of what is discussed (see Ekassi again). But several authors have highlighted the persistent reference – either to criticize or to appropriate – to philosophies from other parts of the world. Moreover, several of the authors cited here do not work exclusively in the South. Mbele's article, for example, takes as its theme Mbonda – an author with a significant involvement in Canada (as we shall see below). Finally, the whole dossier is put together with Brazil and Cameroon at the center, which means that relations between different parts of the world are implied throughout as being possible and important to work on. Ernst WOLFF, a South African philosopher currently working in Belgium, thematizes some of the difficulties associated with the diverse intertwined lines that are knotted together in the lives of many philosophers. To put it simply, the philosophies of the "South" are also practiced elsewhere in the world, and the philosophers of the "South" are also responsible for the ongoing appropriation of the philosophies of the "North" in their countries through education and research. His article, "Intercontinental philosophy: Thinking in and for a plural world", is a contribution to an anti-essentialist philosophy, which is aware of its multiple origins and practiced in different forms on all inhabited continents and islands. He argues for an "intercontinental" philosophical ethic, which would be that of philosophizing in full awareness of contemporary globalization and plurality, without any impartial arbiter of disagreement. It is a philosophy that takes as seriously the violent asymmetries between people as it does the possibility of establishing communalities.

Charles Romain MBELE's article, "Trouble with *épistémè* according to Ernest-Marie MBONDA", can be read as an elaboration of the difficulties of such an undertaking and, more generally, of a critical recovery of the ambiguous legacy. In a critical debate with Ernest-Marie Mbonda, Mbele examines the promises and pitfalls of attempts to refocus philosophy on Africa. The risk of an ill-advanced decolonization is to imitate certain biased scientific conceptualizations that such decolonization aims to overcome. Mbonda thinks that a more fruitful path is to destabilize the hegemonic forms of science, by introducing a discursive partner in contradiction, where ethnocentric monologism still holds sway. Mbele's point of view is to argue for a politics of continuous creation of a new culture, as an alternative to Western modernism or cultural Afrocentrism in the narrow sense.

That such attempts at self-definition are not predestined for success is underlined by Lúcio Álvaro MARQUES in "Authors of ourselves. The construction of the Brazilian intellectual in the 21st century". Marques analyzes a series of publications from the last two decades that attempt to capture the state of thinking about who would be "the interpreters of Brazil". He reveals how the selection of those who best reflect Brazil clearly and quite systematically reveals prejudices, either against more left-wing authors, or against women, or again against black authors. Added to this is the puzzling question of the virtual absence of philosophers. These observations lead to profound questions of self-criticism. Where does this male chauvinism and racism come from in a literature that claims to get rid of imposed representations of ourselves? Why, when philosophy claims to address issues of social injustice, does it gain so little visibility in public discourse? Marques's article is an eloquent reminder that the critique of the other, however important

it may be in countries with a history of imperial oppression, must not lead to the renunciation of an internal critique of the processes by which we create ourselves within the (limited) space of initiative available to us.

This point is in some ways suggested by several other contributions in this volume: the urgent and necessary critique of geopolitical asymmetries and their ongoing harmful effects must not lead us to a simplistic bipolar essentialization of the roles of academics worldwide. This would only reproduce past patterns of oppression through knowledge (Mbonda) and play into the hands of those who, with harmful intentions, are only too willing to assert the absolute singularity of the cultural other.

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