

Thinking Africa “Shifting the Geography of Reason”

It is often claimed that knowledge is power or that power is knowledge. Edward Said and Michel Foucault have argued convincingly that knowledge and power are inextricably linked and that there is no neutral or apolitical knowledge. This insight assumes particular relevance when one considers African Studies (i.e. the study of Africa, its history, sociology, philosophy, politics et cetera). The primary reason for this is that the systematic study of Africa as a geographically specific but culturally diverse entity has imperial origins. As a discipline in the global academy, African Studies has its roots in colonialism and to this day remains shaped by contemporary forms of imperialism. Accompanying this has been what Jamaican philosopher Lewis Gordon refers to as a racialised division of labour in which blacks have experiences that whites interpret.

There have been a number of innovative attempts to, in the useful phrase of the Caribbean Philosophy Association, “shift the geography of reason.” In Africa, the most important of these has certainly been the work of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). Despite this, however, the broad field of African Studies remains a contested and fractured field with the deepest fracture being between modes of knowledge production that see Africa as object of study by epistemic communities located elsewhere and those that see themselves as part of a community of African subjects producing knowledge for their own epistemic community.

Add to this the globalising, neo-liberal instrumentalisation of knowledge production at universities and things get really complex. As far back as 1992 Derrida reminded the university community that, in an age of quality assurance and accountability, the primary meaning of “responsibility” lies in theorising the paradoxes and themes that constitute the contemporary university as institution and the politics of knowledge production in it. Possibly the most fundamental paradox is the tension between the need to somehow consolidate the study of Africa in disciplinary terms (illustrated by the ambitions of “African Philosophy”) while the very disciplinary organisation of knowledge is increasingly being eroded by multi-disciplinarity and the realities of globalisation. Thinking Africa was conceived, in part, as a response to three questions that present different permutations of this fundamental paradox.

Firstly, What is Africa? As anthropologist James Ferguson points out, Africa is such a huge and diverse continent that it is questionable whether we can meaningfully speak of it as a 'place'. But, argues Ferguson, while it is all very well for academics to feel reluctant to write about 'Africa' and to prefer to focus on some small and more manageable sub-field, the world out there is full of talk about 'Africa' and if African academics retreat from these conversations, we can only marginalise ourselves further.

Secondly, Who is the study of Africa for? This question was at the heart of one of the most memorable conflicts in the field of African Studies that took place in 1969 at a meeting of the US-based African Studies Association. A group of scholars calling themselves the Black Caucus shook the African Studies establishment by insisting that the study of Africa needed to be relevant to the interests and concerns of black people in Africa rather than being caught up in theoretical debates that, to the Black Caucus, seemed irrelevant to the concerns of most Africans. A more recent criticism in a similar vein comes from Adebayo Olukoshi who has criticised African Studies for focusing on 'decoding' Africans for the rest of the world rather than explaining the African world to Africans. Thinking Africa responds to both these questions by running research projects relevant to Africa, by drawing principally from Africana intellectual traditions and by writing principally for an African audience. Of course this does not mean that we want to isolate ourselves from the rest of the academic world but it does mean that we recognise, with Frantz Fanon, that the universal is always achieved through an engagement with the particular.

A third, related question asks, What is the study of Africa for? Some approach the study of Africa as if its main aim were to solve development problems, insisting that more reflective, broad-ranging studies constitute 'fiddling while Rome burns'. In some cases these sorts of arguments end up being complicit with racist ideas about the division of academic labour and African academics find themselves being expected to behave as 'native informants' for Northern academics who assume that they will do the work of theorising African experiences. Others object that African Studies should not be dictated to by the development policy world or by politicians, but should rather focus on increasing our knowledge and our understanding with broader, more general aims in mind. In the view of Thinking Africa, one way to address this issue is to stress, as Thandika Mkandawire does, that Africa ought to be considered 'an important site for the performance of the human

drama'. Africa ought not to be treated as a laboratory where theories and models developed from the study of other parts of the world can simply be applied, nor should Africa be treated as if its difficulties and triumphs are somehow exceptional and specific only to Africa. Rather, research on Africa should contribute both to our understanding of Africa and to our understanding of the broader human condition. Furthermore, while the study of Africa should of course lend itself to practical application in response to various 'problems', we do not believe that this should be reduced to a narrow concern with 'problem-solving' to the neglect of a consideration of broader, more general questions. But there is no either/or here. We do not have to choose between "solving problems" and generating theory. In *Thinking Africa* we believe that we can systematically and thematically address what seems to us to be most urgent while doing so in a manner that generates original and exciting theory.

Once it is agreed that African Studies should root itself in African intellectual traditions and communities there will, of course, always remain ideological differences. This is to be expected and encouraged. *Thinking Africa* aims to be as non-sectarian as is possible while remaining committed to a broadly emancipatory project that is open-ended and critical.

From a teaching perspective, *Thinking Africa* aims to promote teaching-led research in which post-graduate students are encouraged to join academics in a collaborative, critical and collegial series of research projects. All the projects relate to Africa in some way, but each project has its own particular focus and approach. In launching this project, we are sufficiently ambitious to seek not only to contribute to existing academic work on Africa, but also to make some small contribution to critical attempts to rethink the study of Africa.

We will formally launch the project in July 2011 with an exciting programme that we hope to repeat annually and that consists of a public lecture, colloquium, and an intense week-long post-graduate winter school. In 2011, the theme will be "Fanon: 50 Years later" and the whole programme will be dedicated to exploring the intellectual legacy of Frantz Fanon. We are hoping to integrate these events into the programme of the National Arts Festival so that they can be integrated into the broader national conversation about what it means to think Africa. Watch ru.ac.za/politics/thinkingafrica for regular updates.