Chapter 12
From Epistemicide and University Knowledge to Pluriversity Knowledge:
Santos's Political Thought on Decolonizing South African Universities

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ABSTRACT

The genocides of the bodies of the natives that happened under the colonial administration were accompanied by epistemicides that erased, silenced, and distorted the histories, languages, and knowledge of the Indigenous people in the colonized milieux. In the South African higher education landscape, the challenge of epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge, the coloniality of university knowledge, and the need for pluriversality of knowledge have been pressing political and intellectual issues in South Africa in particular and the Global South in general. It is from such a perspective that this chapter aims to examine Boaventura de Sousa Santos's political thought on decolonising the university that is tri-dimensionally built on epistemicide, university knowledge, and pluriversity knowledge. This chapter deployed qualitative methodology for the collection and interpretation of collected data. Relevantly, this chapter uses decoloniality theory as a tool that denounces epistemicide and the coloniality of university knowledge and provides a picture of how pluriversity knowledge can be realisable in universities. As a point of contribution, this chapter expands the scholarly literature on the transformation and decolonisation of higher education which is imperative and relevant to the critique of Eurocentrism and Western epistemic and cultural imperialism in the universities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically discusses Boaventura de Sousa Santos's political thought on decolonising the university in the global South in general and South Africa in particular. Santos's political thought on decolonising the university is comprehended and critically assessed into a tri-dimensional conception,

namely: epistemicide, university knowledge, and pluriversity knowledge. As a prerequisite, Santos's political thought on decolonising the university, recalls the critique of the westernised university in South Africa. Relevantly, "South Africa is chosen as a case study because it is today one of the highly volatile sites of multiple struggles including that spearheaded by students which demand decolonisation" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 36). The university in South Africa is critiqued by the students for being Westernised in the sense that it promotes Western science culture at the expense of indigenous knowledge. In this chapter, Santos (2014) defines such a scenario as a manifestation of the rejection, killing, and destruction of indigenous knowledge, 'epistemicide'. Facilitated by such an epistemicide, Western science continues to monopolise the knowledge that is produced by universities. In this chapter, decoloniality is used as a theoretical tool and qualitative approaches are used as methods. It may be suggested that the pluriversity knowledge, a predisposed solution to overcome the epistemic crisis in South African universities, can seriously challenge both epistemicide and the monopoly of university knowledge by Euro-North America.

Concerning the chapter's structure, it is mainly and respectively discussed under five major themes. Firstly, the chapter thematically engages with the critique of Westernized universities in South Africa. Here, the chapter illuminates and justifies that South African universities are Westernised, meaning that in South Africa, the design and architecture of South African universities are challenged in accommodating the majority of black students. The intention of these universities is however to continue to promote Western science culture over the indigenous knowledge. Secondly, the chapter discusses Santos's (2014) conception of epistemicide. At this point, departing from Santos's political imagination, the chapter discusses the concept of epistemicide as the rejection, destruction, and killing of indigenous/native knowledge in South African universities. Thirdly, the chapter critically discusses Santos's (2021) conception of university knowledge. Here, the university knowledge is monopolised by the Euro-North American canon. Fourthly, the chapter x-rays Santos's (2021) conception of pluriversity knowledge, as a potential solution to the problems of epistemicide and coloniality of university knowledge in South Africa. Lastly, the chapter is concerned with the relevance of decoloniality in the realisation of pluriversity knowledge.

CRITIQUE OF THE WESTERNISED UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Universities in South Africa are labelled as 'Westernised' in the sense that they are built on the Western/modern science culture and such a "Modern science presents itself as a set of arguments that address the universal audience" (Santos, 2021, p. 109). It is now an open secret that "All over the world, the university is facing many challenges" (Santos, 2021, p. 309) related to the increasing demands for the universities in South Africa to be de-westernized/decolonized. In South Africa, institutions of higher education are not only Western but also globalized during this modern colonial era (Mamdani, 2019). According to Mamdani (2019), "The modern[/Western] university, as the name suggests, claims a universal significance as a site for the study of the human. Its graduates claim 'excellence' globally" (p. 15). In universities in South Africa, students are forced to daily accrue Westernised programs to the detriment of their indigenous knowledge that is not recognized and rejected by the perpetual system that promotes the total Westernisation of the university. Unfortunately, "In terms of this definition, in many countries, the overwhelming majority of private universities and even some of the public ones are not universities at all" (Santos, 2021, p. 221). Santos (2021) further stresses that "The big problem of the university is the fact that the label 'university' is today attached to initiatives, organization or

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