

Theorizing for the Present and the Future: Africa, Knowledge Creation, and Global Challenges

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Many scholars have made the point that Africa should not be thought about as the embodiment of deficiencies and the source of global challenges. They make the obvious point that Africa can give the world theories to resolve global challenges (Sarr, 2019; 2021; Tamale, 2020). These are incontrovertible statements of fact. What needs to be worked out, however, is how we should think of Africa as a site of global theorizing if we take the continent's historical and ongoing connections with global processes as our starting point. This raises at least three questions: 1) what ideas and concepts can we develop/adapt from African spaces to address (Africa-wide and by implication) global challenges? 2) how should we think about global problems if we imagined them from within Africa? 3) What would be the outcome for Africa if it becomes the source of solutions to global challenges both in theory and practice?

All three questions point to the importance of making Africa a center of global theory. To attain this goal, we need to consider how we should recalibrate our orientation to thinking. This entails conceptualizing new ways to assess the scope of theoretical exertion in the different disciplines so that, for instance, we can fully appreciate the global dimension of a theory developed in African spaces which contributes to the resolution, from an African space, of challenges that have global implications. The starting point of thinking globally from Africa therefore focuses attention on the so-called 'how questions' – that is, questions about

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how to think and not merely what we are thinking about. This point is crucial due to the ubiquitous attempts to reduce theorizing from and about Africa to resolving specific problems.

We can trace the intensification of the focus on solving urgent problems as the core of thinking Africa to the rise of the development non-profit sector. Intending to do good, many charity organizations prioritize knowledge about specific problems in Africa over knowledge of the whole. But we must find a way to know the parts and the whole if we wish to reconstitute the idea of Africa as a center of theorizing about human experiences as such. How is this possible? One of the key answers explored from different angles in this special issue is that it is both an idea and a geography of valid human experiences. To think globally from Africa, we must recast our knowledge about key concepts, methods and the very idea and use of theory. In other words, we must ask: what makes a concept a basic or key concept? How do we develop adequate methods to transcend, for instance, the crippling epistemic vice in postcolonial theorizing which Mahmood Mamdani regards as “analogy seeking” which leads to “paralysis of perspective”? (Mamdani, 1996, p. 12). The answers to these questions are crucial for articulating a robust conception of adequate perspective on the value of theory.

Let us now return to the “how-question”. How can we think of the continent as a site from where global issues can be thought through and resolved? How do we address our own challenges as the African world: (precariousness, inequality, othering, alienation) while signposting the way to resolving these human issues that can be found in every part of the world? If our hypothesis - that to do this requires very specific, relevant, situated, yet adaptable knowledges - hold true, what are these knowledges and how can they be created?

In finding a new orientation to thinking that would enable us see Africa as a natural site for the generation, not merely consumption, of global theories, we attain two goals. We conceive solutions to current challenges in the African world (precariousness, inequality, othering, alienation) and we demonstrate new ways of understanding global problems as shared human problems that can be resolved using resources from every part of the world. A condition for answering this question is understanding why Africa should aspire to this ideal. Why does it matter to develop the conditions that will deepen Africa’s stake as a center of the sort of thinking we can regard as global thinking?

This question becomes an urgent concern due to recent work that have shown just how much contested the idea of the universal has become. The desirability of this aspiration for the continent in the marketplace of theory is illuminated by the arguments of two critical voices of the humanities, Chinua Achebe and Souleymane Bachir Diagne. On the one hand, as Achebe argued, when “every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest ... mankind will be all the richer for the variety and distinctiveness of the offering” (Achebe, 1988, p. 89). Diagne, on the other hand, proposes that we should aspire towards the universal because it makes possible the “incessant testing” of the self against otherness (Diagne & Amselle, 2020, p. 25). Africa therefore ought to aspire to be a context for the creation of theories with global relevance because of the collective duty to enrich mankind and also due to the need to test the particular against the other. Without such cross pollination of ideas, we risk imprisoning ourselves in the comforts of what is familiar, hence stunting progress.

Regarding the question of how to make thinking the global possible from the African space, a major problem we must confront pertains to methodology. The challenge of methodology cannot be underestimated because we must have some degree of certainty about the suitability of the tools we deploy in our thinking if we wish to transform or reveal the global relevance of concepts embedded in African spaces. We must also ensure that key concepts are suitable to enable us to develop the new kind(s) of orientation to the thinking we desire. Although it cannot be argued with any degree of plausibility that there is a singular path to addressing the challenge of methodology, it is crucial to acknowledge the pertinence of critique, both immanent and otherwise.

How to think globally from African spaces therefore necessarily involves paying attention to how we ought not to think about Africa. For, it is the imaginative lens we have about the idea of Africa that shapes the guiding question that will reveal the viable path we should take in any instance where we seek to construct a global theory from an African space. The how-question, therefore, is a question of disposition to thinking and not a challenge of epistemic procedure. It is a recognition that the thinking subject and object of cognition cannot be separated in any meaningful way if we genuinely seek to overcome the currently established normative order.

This is the case because a crucial aspect of knowledge creation is the question of social transformation. This invites a prior question: What is the social responsibility of the scholar in the African World? While endless debates precede this edition framed as a binary between the global scholar and the organic scholar, the conditions of contemporary existence in the African world renders this binary stale. For, the scholar in the African world no longer lives the comfortable life of the immediate post-colonial African intellectual whose conditions of self-reproduction were guaranteed by a capacitated and ambitious state. The crisis of production and social reproduction means that strikes and discontent are at the doorstep of institutions and the scholars in them.

The task of the intellectual is therefore no longer an external relation to society but one of existence which ties the academy to society. For no segment of society is spared the crisis. Social responsibility is thus given. What is up for debate is how scholars position themselves: to lean towards transformational ideas and link up with social forces working for a different social arrangement or to seek ways for survival in crisis. The contributions in the volume align with the former for all the papers are attempts by scholars to make sense of ideas and social questions about how to produce knowledge that resonate beyond the immediate reality of scholars.

The intricate connection between abstraction and theory is one to take seriously. For every concept, category and theory communicates some idea about the world or an aspiration of a desired world. Thinking carefully about the concepts, categories and theories that we deploy reflects how seriously we take the task of both analysis and concrete social reality. For concepts can help us apprehend reality, describe it and attempt to influence its course. An extroverted, abstracted and imposed concept can produce a deformed analysis that is followed by socially deleterious action with implications for social relations, livelihoods and even lives. It is against this background that this issue of the *Global Africa Journal* deals with the question of knowledge creation from the African World.

The issue contributes to the revitalization of social science and humanities scholarship to make them be of service to the creation of a new understanding of Africa and the World. The contributions deal with the currently intractable problems of the world, such as the meanings and implications of the reparation of transatlantic slave trade and colonization, the ever-present challenge of global injustice and the question of migration. The papers grapple with questions about the state of Africa and how Africans see themselves today and in the future, issues related to knowledge production on the continent, especially its contribution to the state of Africa and attempts at transcending the so-called African condition. Furthermore, the papers address questions about what exactly decolonization is and the pitfalls of some of the trends that seek to “return” to something.

The need for dialogic knowledge is articulated in this issue by one of the most distinguished scholars in Africa. In an interview with *Global Africa*, Professor Issa Shivji emphasizes the importance of the ideas that come from people outside the academy and the need to engage those. In that spirit he sees the role of knowledge creation in contemporary Africa as tied to old questions with present-day manifestations: extraverted knowledge production, capitalist accumulation in every aspect of life, commodification and narrow conceptions of rights as individual goods entitlements.

A crucial aspect of the questions posed in this special issue is how we see and think of Africa, who belongs and how can we reconstitute a Pan-African orientation to both knowledge production and social belonging. The issue opens by looking at the implications of what it means to think and create societies based on narrow definitions of the states and citizenship as was experienced 40 years ago when around two million Africans were expelled from Nigeria, with the majority being Ghanaians. This gave birth to the now iconic Ghana Must Go bag which has come to define that moment but also the precarity of ordinary mobile populations. It is important to note that the expulsions of Africans from Nigeria in 1983 was preceded by an earlier expulsion of Africans (mainly Nigerians) from Ghana in 1969. In light of this history, the issue presents images from a 40-day exhibition organized by the Migration for Development and Equality Project (MIDEQ) to mark the 40th year of the expulsions as part of interventions to counter xenophobic narratives and mobilisations in Africa by building solidarity between ordinary people across all forms of social borders.

In *Rediscovering Mahdi Elmandjra: Reflections on the Global South, Development, Technopolitics and Knowledge Production*, Abdelkarim Skouri draws on the works of Mahdi Elmandjra, a pioneer scholar and activist of futures studies in Africa and the South, to draw attention to the linkages between knowledge production in Africa, social dialogue in culturally diverse Africa and transformative education. Purposing Elmandjra’s work to think the present and future, Skouri looks at the place of Africa and the Global South in a lopsided and extractivist global governance.

Movement, whether physical displacement to other places or geographical reordering for social change, is one of the ways ordinary Africans imagine and attempt to struggle for a different world. In *‘Becoming someone’ – the imagery of South Africa as a destination by Ethiopian migrants*, Caterina Mazilli, Faisal Garba, and Jessica Hagen-Zanker take up knowledge production by ordinary migrants through the decision-making processes of Ethiopian migrants who face gendered and class oppression over the course of a very long and tiring journey to South

Africa. Arguing against the trend in the literature on migrant decision which foregrounds the ‘reputation’ of destinations and migration policies in explaining where migrants decided to migrate to, they draw on research from ongoing work on South-South migration to focus on how migrants perceive destinations and the relationship between that perception and structural factors that determine decisions about destination country. They do this by thinking from the concrete knowledges of the migrants and placing that knowledge in conversation with literature without privileging the latter, as is routinely done.

As indicated earlier, the “how” question is central to attempts at producing liberatory knowledge. Methodological choices, in particular how data is collected in a way that is attuned to context, is the challenge posed by Bertelli, Calvo, Coulibaly (Massa), Coulibaly (Moussa), Lavallée, Mercier, Mesplé-Somps and Traoré in *Collecting data on sensitive experiences and attitudes: a Malian case study*. Building on an experimental survey of 1,509 individuals in Mali regarding their social experiences, political attitudes and insecurity, the authors argue that the framing, and social acceptability of interview questions is crucial in conducting research that takes account of the social circumstances of research participants, and thinks with them in producing knowledge.

Overcoming the imposition of solutions and thoughts, while creating socially relevant approaches that takes seriously the knowledge of ordinary people is something many activists and communities advocate for in dealing with existential question of environmental degradation. Nonetheless, the practice of importing package solutions continues. Scandella, Liousse, Yoboué, Becerra, Carrère and Vanié in *Reducing air pollution in Abidjan: from Scientific Ambition to Field Implementation* show how scientists in both the social and natural sciences can take seriously the knowledge, desires, aspirations and perceptions of individuals and communities that they work with in understanding pollution and in finding solutions that are situated because they emerged from a dialogic process that sees scientific knowledge production as social and not transcendental.

Samson A. Akanni takes forward the imperative of theorizing the human condition from African material by taking dance as a site of knowledge production. The works of Germaine Acogny, a choreographer and dancer famous for centering African aesthetics, stories, and philosophies, provide the basis for what Akanni calls “...decolonial tools that decentralize Western domination within African narratives”. The paper is written around a set of questions: “how can Acogny’s Technique serve as a tool to decolonize African bodies? And in what ways does Acogny’s performance challenge colonial ideologies?”. Akanni aims to accomplish a two-fold goal in the paper, namely, to disrupt dominant frames while opening up African aesthetics and availing it for a decentered and human global dialogues.

Reda Benkirane also takes up old questions as formulated by the Philosopher Mohammed Iqbal and repurposes them for the challenges of life in the world beyond Western domination. What kinds of values, tools, outlooks and imagination can guide such a world without replicating the dominant consumerist, gluttonous and accumulative tendency that marks the present? “The quest for science and the challenge of complexity” is thus preoccupied with “how we can «pave» the plane of the world (i.e., cover its surface) without saturating or overflowing space and time. In this transition phase, suddenly short of space and time, how can we

do better with less, much less? Benkirane considers this question to formulate a perspective on how to think about the future beyond particularities and false universals that are often violently imposed.

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