



## ***The rise of xenophobic populism, knowledge inequalities, and the double binds of Europe-Africa academic relations***

by Vito Laterza

The advance of xenophobic populism in Europe is posing a serious threat to the ongoing efforts to address knowledge inequalities between European and African academics.

Debates about the need to transform and equalise relations in academic knowledge production flourish, driven by student protests in South Africa, the UK, the US and elsewhere. At the same time, we are witnessing a closer alignment of research agendas with state strategic aims and the “national interest”. European governments extract ever greater amounts of raw materials and cheap labour from African countries, while giving little, if anything, in return to African citizens and migrants.

We are caught in what anthropologist Gregory Bateson termed a “double bind”. Bateson developed the concept to explain some of the key features of schizophrenia, analysed as a social pathology marked by a breakdown in communication between people affected by schizophrenia and their family members.

A double bind occurs when somebody is faced with two or more openly conflicting messages communicated to them by a figure of authority – in the case of the person affected by schizophrenia, they are exposed throughout their childhood to contradictory instructions given by one of the parents.

For instance, such conflicting messaging occurs when a parent, on one hand, makes constant affirmations of love and expresses a desire to be near the child; and, on the other hand provides instructions with the opposite meaning: “it’s time to go bed now”, “you need to get ready to go out”, and so on.

The verbal message of closeness and love is contradicted by verbal and nonverbal displays of distance and coldness. When such contradictory messages become routine, the patient might develop schizophrenic symptoms, which, in Bateson’s analysis, range from withdrawal and inability to express one’s feeling of discomfort and puzzlement at the conflicting instructions, to outbursts of rage and hallucinations. Bateson used his theory of schizophrenia as a theoretical metaphor applicable to several domains of social life, and the ecology of communications in society more broadly.

Predating the rise of Trump and Brexit, our double binds as European academics were shaped by our colonial legacy. We have been trained to understand our relationship with researchers and knowledges from all around the world as one of equality and mutual respect. But we have also been conditioned to embrace

ideas of superiority of “European knowledge”, defined in sharp separation from – and sometimes outright opposition to – other knowledges. Our European privilege is sustained by such assertions of distinction.

This has created a “schizophrenic” ideological condition, where we have devalued the academic labour of African colleagues and favoured the reproduction and concentration of Eurocentric knowledge and personnel, while making heartfelt statements about inclusion, mutuality and respect.

On the whole, European academy remains overwhelmingly white and Eurocentric, often in stark contrast to respective national demographics. These biases are reflected in epistemologies that continue to obscure and erase the contribution of Africa-centred knowledges. Because of the overt commitment to equality and anti-racism, much of this discrimination happens not as a clearly stated policy statement, but through informal means – what Sarah Henkeman (2018) calls invisible forms of violence in her work on racism and discrimination in South Africa.

This kind of liberal colonial double bind however has been replaced by ever more polarised injunctions:

- We are urged to acknowledge and act upon pressing demands for radical transformation and to address inequalities in material resources and symbolic capital between Europe and Africa;

and

- we are pushed towards welcoming, or at least accepting, the rise of the far right across Europe as a legitimate “movement of the people”, that deserves empathy and respect. We are asked to value our national identities above everything else, and pursue the national interest in our academic endeavours, as researchers funded by the state, and loyal citizens.

If the liberal colonial double bind was already problematic, the decolonial vs nationalist one is likely to cause more pain and incoherence. How can we work towards a world where we can include a variety of voices, and transform academic structures into equal and representative spaces, while at the same time we pursue exclusionary policies demanded by governments and the broader society? Finding a synthesis between these two demands is simply not possible.

This new competition of nationalisms is also creating divisions within Europe, where legitimate fights around precarity are quickly degenerating into calls for “Italians First”, “British First”, and so on, ironically destabilising the notion of European supremacy carried on from colonial times. The idea of a pan-European alliance of reactionary forces – what French far-right politician Marine Le Pen and others call a “Europe of nations” – is in fact an hallucination, clashing against the permanent reality of conflict and fragmentation that such vision sets in motion.

From a systemic point of view, these multiple double binds are not sustainable, and if we remain stuck in them, there will be dire consequences. Leftists, centrists and right-wingers across Europe are converging on a shared anti-immigration platform, driven by dystopian measures such as the creation of more camps for migrants and refugees inside and outside Europe.

The goal is clear: stop immigration flows at all costs, and segregate migrants and refugees outside “normal” society, as a second-class population not deserving of basic human rights. These material practices are enacted to revive European nations reminiscent of our fascist and colonial past. The cathartic effect of scapegoating migrant Others for all of Europe’s failures, is a symptom of a deep existential and moral crisis that has now infected the minds and sentiments of most Europeans.

While this destructive moral drama unfolds, the same neoliberal system that is often attacked in conspiratorial overdrive by populist forces, continues its relentless advance in all spheres of social and economic life.

Despite this worrying state of affairs, the European academy continues to have a considerable amount of material and intellectual resources, when compared to its African counterpart – which experienced decades of draconian austerity and perpetual economic crisis caused by an unequal world system dominated by Western countries and China.

With the resources at our disposal, we can do something to reverse the trend: studying society, economy and politics from a critical and engaged perspective, focusing on the structures of power and inequality that have led us to where we are today. To do this, we need to study ourselves, and sensitively unveil the complicities and collusions that sustain contemporary Eurocentric knowledge production.

In the specific case of African studies, we should avoid studying African issues in isolation, and focus more on the nexus of business, politics and society that has marked the rise to power of politicians such as Matteo Salvini – Italy’s notorious anti-migrant home affairs minister.

Rather than studying “others” and fetishising European academic heroes advocating for the “downtrodden”, we should deploy our analytical and theoretical skills to study people and organisations that produce discrimination, poverty, wars and widespread suffering. This means analysing European institutions that have militarised migration flows such as FRONTEX, and ending our complicity with the “managed migration” paradigm. Social studies that focus solely on migrant routes and migrants’ and refugees’ attitudes and behaviours often work as forms of intelligence-gathering for state security agencies. We need to abandon these practices in favour of systemic studies that examine powerful actors, rather than silently colluding with them.

We should direct our attention to the damaging effects of European raw materials strategy on Africa. We have to move beyond descriptions of the plight of dispossessed African communities objectified as recipients of our charity and outrage in isolation, and firmly cast our gaze on Western multinationals, experts and managers that make such exploitation and dispossession possible.

In short, we must take on the forces that push us in the direction of loyalty, compliance and complacency with a system that has now unambiguously declared that European supremacy is good, desirable and a feasible policy goal.

To overcome our doubts and hesitations, it is worth remembering what is at stake. As anthropologist Divine Fuh (2017) cogently puts it:

*We must recognise and acknowledge the critical context in which we find ourselves – the human is under threat. We are facing extinction. And this is not just about the ecological challenges that are driving the sustainability and Anthropocene movement, but also particularly about the core values that frame and underpin human society and relations such as interdependency and mutual respect. Modernity and its accompanying projects such as development and democracy are no longer as tenable as promised and have not successfully created wealth, stability, harmony and equality. The last several years has seen an increase in right wing political and religious fundamentalism, leading to an increase in overt bigotry and hate-motivated violence worldwide.*

The recent wave of protests in the US against the horrors of Trump's anti-immigration policies shows that it is never too late to take action and change course. What we cannot do is bury our heads in the sand, in the hope that the storm will pass.

*Vito Laterza is associate professor in the Department of Global Development and Planning, University of Agder, Norway. He is an anthropologist and development scholar, and has published on labour, economic development, socio-economic inequalities and social and political mobilisation in Africa.*

## **References**

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