CHAPTER 15

Before we start: science and power in the constitution of Africa

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> *Creating new names and assessments and apparent truths is enough to create new 'things'.* (Nietzsche, quoted by Hacking 2006)

Introduction

There is a basic paradox underlying our knowledge of Africa. The assumption that there is any such thing as 'Africa' implies that we know what it is. Yet, much of the search for knowledge on Africa is premised on the assumption that we do not know enough about it to be able to claim that what we do know corresponds to that thing we call Africa. In other words, to know is to be able to judge the validity of what we claim to know. We judge validity by pitting pieces of knowledge against the phenomenon itself and checking whether there is any coherence between what we claim to know, i.e. what we think accurately describes an object, and the object itself. Here, however, we come up against a difficult philosophical problem. To be able to establish the validity of what we claim to know, we must know beforehand the thing about which we are producing knowledge. It feels like a tautological form of reasoning.

Of course, there is a way out of this. It consists in the idea that our knowledge of anything is both cumulative and based on logic. The claim that knowledge is cumulative means that, when we gather knowledge on anything, we are simply adding information to something whose existence we have already established in one form or another. Indeed, gathering knowledge on anything largely depends on the prior existence of objects, however that existence may have been established. The idea that our knowledge is based on logic means that claims to truthfulness are not judged according to whether there is any fit between what we say and the

nature of the object itself. Rather, it is based on whether our propositions can withstand a logical test of their soundness.

The basic claim of this chapter is that there is no such thing as 'knowledge of Africa'. What we describe as 'knowledge of Africa' is the process through which we constitute Africa as an object. Everything else that ensues from this process is an elaboration on the conditions under which we can legitimately claim to know. To make this case I will first briefly present some critical injunctions voiced by many scholars in order to sharpen our gaze on what is at stake when claims are made about knowing Africa. Next, I will draw on the work of Ian Hacking to suggest a sociology of knowledge of scientific knowledge and power relations.[1] My claim will be that scientific knowledge and power relations conflate into a mandate conferred upon science to speak truthfully about Africa. This yields a construct which I will describe as 'scientific power' that preys on the critical naivety of researchers as evidenced by their apparent reluctance to engage knowledge production where it really takes place, namely in the theoretical frameworks, conceptual categories and methodological procedures that form the basis for the conditions of possibility of any knowledge at all.

The main goal here is to argue against a whole critical tradition in African studies which seems to be premised on the belief that there is a phenomenon out in the world called 'Africa', against the background of which truth claims can be validated. On this account, to speak truth on Africa would be tantamount to checking whether what we claim reflects the true nature of the thing called 'Africa'. This is a scholarly dangerous path, for it leaves scholarly argument at the mercy of ideological preferences. One example may suffice to drive the point home. In a famous debate opposing the late Archie Mafeje, the South African anthropologist, and Sally Falk Moore, an American anthropologist, the former rejected the latter's historical account of the relationship between anthropology and Africa mainly on the grounds that, as a white American scholar, she could not speak truthfully about the relationship.[2] Mafeje's more substantive arguments on the book, namely those concerning the relationship between colonialism and anthropology, as well as those bearing on how anthropologists related to Africans and their cultures, are poignant and relevant. And yet, it is the prerogative claimed by his moral and ideological right as a 'Black African scholar' to question Moore's right to speak truthfully about Africa that lends force to Mafeje's argument. This is a problem and it needs to be addressed. The case I make for identifying a construct by the name 'scientific power' is an attempt at suggesting more useful scholarly ways of engaging with the claims that scholars make when they produce knowledge on Africa.

1 Hacking 2006

2 Mafeje 1996; Moore 1996; Moore 1994

Some critical injunctions

So far, I have been addressing issues of a philosophical nature. They are important caveats to any pursuit of knowledge on Africa, for they draw our attention to very important issues that need to be addressed at the outset of any inquiry into 'Africa'. On a very basic level, one could ask what it is that people are studying when they state that they are studying the geography, history, economy, politics, or even culture of Africa. The question is not whether it is legitimate to use such a broad notion,[3] but rather the assumptions that converged towards producing the very object of that gaze, namely 'Africa' and the processes through which it was naturalised into a legitimate object of inquiry. Since Valentin Mudimbe's path-breaking work on the *Invention of Africa* we have learnt not to take Africa for granted, for much of what stands for Africa is, on Mudimbe's account, simply a (mis)representation of the continent, an artefact, as it were, of a will to power.[4] In this sense, then, the question that we should ask concerns what we need to do before we even start. Are we sure it is Africa that we are addressing? Mudimbe himself would claim, if his argument is taken to its logical end, that true knowledge of Africa is impossible simply because colonial rule and the colonial library that has been mobilised to organise our representations of the continent relied on a discursive power that has effectively rendered it impossible for the real Africa to come to the fore – real Africa is what could have been. What makes the whole situation tragic is the fact, according to Mudimbe, that the conceptual apparatus that we could draw from to recover real Africa is based on epistemological assumptions that erased it through the power of their own discourse.

So, asking whether we are sure that it is Africa we are addressing is a thorny question. This is because the answer is disarmingly simple. Indeed, all that we need to do in order to be able to start talking about Africa is to claim that we are doing just that. What is left unsaid, though, is the possibility that the object whose prior existence is presupposed by our inquiry and curiosity may actually be constituted by that inquiry itself. The assumption that there is an object out there which can be retrieved and rendered intelligible through our inquiry may belie an insidious intellectual exercise that actually contrives the object through the theoretical, conceptual and methodological tools that are deployed to purportedly produce knowledge on the very same objects. Our theories, concepts and methods

3 As in "Africa is not a country".

4 Mudimbe's argument (Mudimbe 1988) was highly influenced by Edward Said's book on *Orientalism* (Said [1978] 2003), drawing as it did on the more general arguments developed by Michel Foucault (Foucault 2002) in his discussion of the order of knowledge. For the sake of comprehensiveness it is important to mention Walter Mignolo's *The Idea of Latin America* (Mignolo 2005) which does for Latin America the same job that Said's book did for the Middle East and Mudimbe's did for Africa.

are not necessarily resources that we use to render objects visible. Rather, they are resources that we deploy to constitute them in the first place.

This is particularly true of Africa, especially on two accounts. First, in some ways, knowledge about Africa is motivated by interests, for example, the interest of colonial powers, the interest of competing trading partners, the interest of social activists, etc. How Africa is conceptualised under such circumstances will to some extent be a function of the interests underlying the pursuit of knowledge in those particular instances. This is not to say that knowledge is essentially value-laden. Rather, it is a reminder that there is more to knowledge than just curiosity. As far as environmentalism is concerned, for instance, Richard H. Grove argues in his *Green Imperialism* that the colonial state lies at the origin of western environmentalism, particularly in what he calls 'Edenic and Orientalist search'.[5] Agarwal and Narain make the same point about the present by claiming that much global warming discourse is a form "environmental colonialism".[6] Now, this does not undermine whatever good may come from environmentalism. It simply points out a mere truism, namely that knowledge is motivated. This motivation,, which can be political, economic or even cultural, can either represent or misrepresent. Secondly, the constitutive role played by theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources is particularly true of Africa to the extent that often these are cognitive resources whose solidity as tools of inquiry came into fruition in alien settings. To be more specific, knowledge of Africa has been produced within what we might define as a Western episteme. The theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources through which Africa is to this day rendered visible and intelligible speak from a place, about that place and in accordance with standards of plausibility that define that particular place as the normative standard against the background of which truthfulness is established. Kwame Anthony Appiah had already raised this issue in the context of his discussion of the predicament of African scholars' critique of knowledge about Africa. He makes the point in a poignant way: "The Western emperor has ordered the natives to exchange their robes for trousers: their act of defiance is to insist on tailoring them from homespun material. Given their arguments, plainly, the cultural nationalists do not go far enough; they are blind to the fact that their nativist demands inhabit a Western architecture."[7] Again, this paradox does not undermine the legitimate claims to truth that can be made from within a position that resists 'western epistemology'. It simply points out the problem and makes clear why 'before we start' is a crucial moment in the production of knowledge about Africa.

5 Grove 1995: p. 474; see also Grove 1997
6 Agarwal/Narain 1991
7 Appiah 1992: p. 60

Many scholars have drawn our attention to how knowledge production constitutes objects. I have already mentioned Valentin Mudimbe.[8] Paulin Hountondji is another useful reference, especially his injunction against the intellectual division of labour that devalues the work of African scholars to the condition of mere hunters and gatherers of primary data that more intellectually sophisticated scholars and research programmes from the North translate into intelligible accounts of the human condition.[9] Almost a decade ago, Jack Goody added an important dimension to this criticism by describing Western copyright claims over basic human values, institutions and practices (love, democracy, aesthetics, etc.) as tantamount to *The Theft of History*.[10] What makes Goody's accusation particularly powerful is his reminder of how scholars easily fall prey to the normative use of concepts. According to Goody, concepts should be seen as analytical grids, rather than categorical descriptions of the essence of an object. His telling example is the notion of 'feudalism'. Conflating the notion with the particular form which it took in Europe is not advisable. It is better, he argues, to define it as 'bonded labour', for this allows for the identification of various forms that can be taken by 'bonded labour'. This approach is more sensitive to different forms of human experience, practices and values.

To take another example in order to illustrate this point we could draw on the widely-used notion of neo-patrimonialism in the study of African politics. The original notion was introduced into the sociology of domination by Max Weber who used it to describe a form of authority based on the prerogative of one individual to discharge power from his claims to a territory and its possessions.[11] The notion then found its way into the political sociology of Africa, mainly through the work of the French scholar Jean-François Médard, but most forcefully through debates unleashed by Jean-François Bayart's book on the *State in Africa* and the so-called politics of the belly and the highly polemical book by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz on what they claimed to be the political instrumentalisation of disorder.[12] In all of these publications, albeit less so in the work of Médard, the purveyed view was that African politics constituted a deviation from a norm.[13] The notion of neo-patrimonialism described that deviation.

The problem with this is that, by reducing African politics to variations on the theme of neo-patrimonialism, researchers failed to live up to Goody's

8 Mudimbe 1988
9 Hountondji 1983; see also Connell's critical remarks in Connell 2006
10 Goody 2006
11 Weber 1978 (see in particular the chapter on *The types of legitimate domination*, pp. 212–301)
12 Médard 1990; Médard 1991, Bayart 1993; Chabal/Daloz 1999
13 The legal-rational norm of the rule of law.

methodological injunction to identify a general condition that can take different forms across space and time. In this particular case, the general condition could have been something like 'forms of discharging political authority' in which patron-client relations could be one such form. Awarding public sector contracts to party benefactors could be another form. Rewarding loyal party militants with political office or seats on the boards of parastatals could be yet another form. It may be that, at the end of the day, patron/client relations as practised in certain African political settings are such that they warrant a reduction of African politics to their operation. However, this would not be the result of a confirmation bias, but rather of applying a conceptual category describing a general condition in non-normative ways. Mahmood Mamdani discusses some of the implications of this in his reflections of what he calls 'history by analogy'.[14] Similar points are made by Jacques Depelchin in his indictment of *Silences in African History*, for what is silenced is that for which there is no room in the conceptual apparatus of hegemonic historical accounts.[15]

To recapitulate, critical injunctions draw our attention to two crucial aspects. First, the claim that we are producing knowledge about Africa is one that cannot be accepted or rejected simply on the merits of the argument according to which the propositions underlying it are consistent with some idea of 'Africa'. In this sense, there does not seem to be any position of authority outside scholarly criteria from which knowledge claims about Africa could be accepted or rejected. Being an 'African' or having the 'right' political frame of mind is not a relevant criterion to assess knowledge claims about Africa. The second aspect follows from this one. There are reasons beyond ethnocentrism, racism and power that could support a rejection or acceptance of knowledge claims about Africa. The most important of these reasons have to do with how the knowledge itself is constructed, i.e. how concepts succeed in establishing a rational link between the theoretical framework and the object that they seek to describe. It is the critical engagement with the challenges posed by this link that not only constitutes scholarly debate, but also provides the basis for assessing the validity of claims made on particular objects. I turn to these issues in the next section by trying to make a case for the existence of a construct which I shall call 'scientific power'. As I will argue, 'scientific power' can be said to mediate our search for knowledge and the limits that we can set to that search.

14 Mamdani 1996
15 Depelchin 2005

Knowledge on Africa

"Before I start" is what public debaters in some African settings say in order to preface their intervention. They are aware of the time that has been allotted to them. For this reason, they use this rhetorical trick to make their point and use the rest of the time to embellish it. Something akin to this happens at the interface of scientific knowledge and Africa. What counts as knowledge of Africa is in some very important respects the preface to the real thing, in fact, the thing in itself. There is an excerpt from Nietzsche's *Gay Science* quoted by the Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking, which is quite instructive in terms of my argument here. It says: "There is something that causes me the greatest difficulty, and continues to do so without relief: unspeakably more depends on *what things are called* than on what they are".[16] Nietzsche ends this thought with the quote that opens this chapter, namely "creating new names and assessments and apparent truths is enough to create new 'things'." My claim is that the relationship of science and Africa is based on naming, not on what Africa is. Of course, one logical difficulty here concerns the paradox of inquiry that I alluded to earlier on in the chapter when I was discussing the difficulty of establishing criteria on the basis of which one could judge the validity of one's knowledge claims. However, there is more to the story.

Nietzsche is drawing our attention to a process described brilliantly by Ian Hacking through the idea of 'engines of discovery'.[17] Engines of discovery are ways of securing knowledge about classes of things but, in the process, they also 'make up' these things. In explaining this notion, Hacking asserts that he is interested in exploring how names interact with the things named.[18] He describes these engines as (a) classifications, (b) people, (c) institutions, (d) knowledge and (e) experts. I would like to suggest that these engines offer a sociology of knowledge of this moment that I call 'before we start'. They encapsulate the assumptions that are constitutive of the object and that belie the assumption of knowledge production underlying much of what we do when we claim to be producing knowledge on Africa. Classifications refer to specific phenomena constituting what we can legitimately describe as the object of our knowledge. Different aspects of 'Africa', i.e. the environment, culture, politics, etc. fall under this term. In fact, the idea of "classification" suggests a judicious selection of something, a point once again emphasising the importance of the caveat to look at this 'before we speak' moment.

The second engine discussed by Hacking is people. In the context of Hacking's discussion, 'people' refers to the people who are implied by the classification.

16 Hacking 2006: p. 23 (italics by Hacking)

17 Hacking, 2006: p. 23

18 Hacking himself describes this as a form of nominalism, i.e. dynamic nominalism, which is sensitive to the fact that the things named change to accommodate the ways of knowing that constitute them.

If the phenomenon is child abuse, 'people' would refer to the individuals who have been, or are held to be victims of that particular practice. In the context of scientific knowledge, 'people' refers to the African actors implied by whatever classification establishing a phenomenon. If, for example, the phenomenon is climate change, 'people' might refer to the communities vulnerable to weather vagaries. The third engine, i.e. 'institutions' is connected directly to this. It describes the organised ways in which a phenomenon, i.e. the object of classification and the people thereby implied, is dealt with. To stick to the climate change example, we could say that relevant UN agencies, research bodies, relief organisations and perhaps even government agencies constitute what we can legitimately describe as 'institutions' in Hacking's sense.[19] The fourth and fifth engines are knowledge and experts, respectively. The former describes the collection of facts and causal links (for instance, that climate change is caused by unsound environmental practices) that provide us with coherent accounts of a phenomenon. The latter refers to the purveyors of the knowledge, i.e. to those who draw on acknowledged sources of authority to speak truthfully about the phenomenon.

It is not the purpose of this short chapter to launch into an inquiry as to how these engines of discovery function in the context of the relationship between scientific knowledge and Africa as an object. However, one thing should become immediately obvious. The claim that knowledge is not about something, but rather constitutes things, has far-reaching consequences. Knowledge is an exercise in power. Science is power. Producing knowledge about Africa is an exercise in power. This assertion goes beyond the usual Foucaultian claim of discursive power that lies at the heart of Mudimbe's discussion of the *Invention of Africa*.[20] It addresses a sociological fact that goes beyond the politics of representation to encompass the idea of naturalisation of knowledge as the revelation of the true nature of things. For this reason, the issue is not the relationship between scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and power, on the other. The issue is scientific power, i.e. the power to speak truth. This power, I submit, has operated on the basis of three essential mechanisms. The first mechanism is colonisation. Scientific power, in this sense, is the ability to take charge of the natural and social environment of a continent and set the boundaries of what can be legitimately said about it. This is not to say that what we know about Africa's natural and social world is wrong in any essential way. The point is that the kinds of truth that are purveyed in conversations about Africa's natural and social worlds are those whose legitimacy and plausibility are established on the basis of

19 "Institutions" function rather like institutions in the sense in which Georg Simmel, the German sociologist, describes "the poor". According to him, the poor man is not poor because of any objective criterion pertaining to the conditions of his existence. He is poor because he is the object of institutional intervention (Simmel 1950).

20 Or even Said's critique of "Orientalism" (Said 2003)

criteria derived from science. In the past, much discussion about local knowledge was in some important respects predicated mainly on the discomfort felt by many who resented the way in which the claims to scientific authority had undermined other ways of knowing.[21] This takes us to the second mechanism. This is the idea which some scholars have described as 'systems of ignorance', i.e. the manner in which the dominance of scientific discourse has undermined local knowledge and forced local specialists on the defensive by placing the onus on them to show the relevance of their knowledge (see also).[22] The third and final mechanism is what I would like to describe as 'paternalistic reason'. Paternalistic reason describes a situation in which problem definitions are foisted upon individuals in the full knowledge that the solutions to these problems are held by those who came up with the problem definitions in the first place.[23] Scientific power is in this sense the power to define what Africa's problems are and to claim the supremacy of the solutions that science suggests while, at the same time, undermining local problem definitions and solutions.

The construct suggested here, namely 'scientific power', operates on two levels. The first level makes the claim that knowledge is reflexive to the extent that it yields the criteria on the basis of which it can be challenged. These criteria entail the exact relationship between concepts and theoretical frameworks on the one hand, and concepts and phenomena or objects on the other. The validity of claims to knowledge at this level can only be usefully made with reference to the internal logic entailed by the links. To put it simply, to claim that a proposition is true or false does not depend on whether it is a truthful representation of reality, but rather whether the linkages are made in sound ways, i.e. in ways that are consistent with the standards shared by the relevant community of scholars. The second level acknowledges the social nature of knowledge production. Here what is assessed is not the claim to truthfulness. Rather, it is the social context within which certain objects become scientifically interesting and the uses to which knowledge so derived can be put to use. Scientific power, in this sense, would refer to the social dynamics that make the production of knowledge possible. While these dynamics can be criticised and deplored, they could not serve as the basis for rejecting the validity of the knowledge produced because this is only possible on the first level.

21 Santos 2007; Neubert/Macamo 2003

22 Lachenman 1994; see also Marglin 1990; Santos 2007; Diagne 2013; Macamo 2011. On the difference between 'experts' and 'specialists' see Neubert/Macamo 2003

23 Stefan Musto, the original inspiration for this, uses the term "manipulative reason" (Musto 1987).

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this brief comment is to raise issues around our claims to knowledge about Africa by drawing attention to the assumptions underlying the theoretical, conceptual and methodological resources which we deploy to produce knowledge on Africa. The defining moment is a paradox straddling our pursuit of knowledge and the very things about which we make knowledge claims. This paradox refers us to a tautology in the justification of knowledge production, since to know something cannot be justified by the thing itself, but rather by the very claim that we make to the effect that we know something. Owing to this apparent tautology, I drew the conclusion that the claims to knowledge we make about Africa are not accounts of what Africa is. Rather, the claims themselves constitute Africa as an object by rendering visible and intelligible what our theoretical frameworks, conceptual categories and methodological procedures assume. I briefly illustrated this by reference to Hacking's engines of discovery to suggest a sociology of knowledge of the manner in which we constitute Africa as an object of study.

Nowhere is this more insidious than in the scientific study of Africa. To the extent that the scientific study of Africa can be described as a colonial enterprise premised on the production of ignorance justifying itself on the basis of a paternalistic form of reason, it would seem appropriate to be reticent about scientific knowledge and power relations. The crucial moment is not represented by the extent to which claims to knowledge can be validated against any particular standard put forward by science itself. The crucial moment occurs before everything else, i.e. *before we start*. Knowledge of Africa is defined by our ways of knowing, i.e. it is about what we can know and how we can know what we know. This crucial moment establishes the nature of the object in ways which render everything else that follows secondary in the sense that what follows is parasitical on unspoken premises and the credulity that underlies an uncritical attitude to the claims of science.

My case, then, rests on the critical injunction not to take what is regarded as knowledge of Africa as the revelation of truth about this particular object. Contrary to what the direction of the discussion in this chapter may suggest, this suspicion is not founded on a fundamental rejection of the claims of science. In fact, the suspicion is a celebration of science to the extent that it enjoins us to be critical about how we come by our knowledge. This elaborates on the idea that what is distinctive about scientific knowledge is not the quality of the answers given to research questions, but rather the procedures that led to the answers. Questioning scientific power is not an ideological exercise in 'Western bashing'. It is a critical inquiry into how theoretical frameworks, conceptual categories and methodological procedures may fool us into believing that the worlds we are after are to be found outside of the bounds set by these intellectual resources. I hope to have produced reasons that should make us rather circumspect about such claims.

After all, our hold on 'Africa' is a discursive one. The ontological security displayed by this concept is one that is founded on our use of concepts and our agreement over the meanings and definitions that we assign to them. Africa is not Africa because it is. It is Africa because we have agreed to describe it as such. In this sense, then, the very possibility of knowledge on Africa, scientific or otherwise, rests on the verve with which we engage the preliminaries of knowledge production. These preliminaries bear directly on the conditions that must be met for enunciation, the places that make enunciation possible and the kinds of agreements that make it possible for concepts to acquire descriptive and analytical value, not to mention the data collection procedures enabling us to claim that pieces of information can be arrayed to produce intelligible datasets.

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