Knowledge Democracy, Transformation and Higher Education[1]

Confidence that a 'one size fits all' global economy and that the 'Western canon' of knowledge are sufficient to see humanity through the next phase of its transformations and adjustments has diminished dramatically over the past years. We have an economic system that is certainly not a tide that floats all boats. We have challenges to the dominance of traditional knowledge claims as well. What does this mean for higher education, for social responsibility and for the way forward?

In 2005 in Durban South Africa some of the inhabitants of the tin-roofed shacks of that city created a blockade on Kennedy Road to protest the sale of land, originally promised to the poor for house building, to an industrialist for commercial purposes. This movement of those living in these shacks has grown into, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shackdwellers movement. But what is unique to this social movement is that they have created their own University of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a space for the creation of knowledge about survival, hope and transformation where the shack dwellers themselves are the scholars, the Professors and the researchers. They create and share knowledge through song, 'live action debates' and discussions and document the knowledge in a web based archive. The shackdwellers of Durban and beyond have boldly taken the word university as their own and turned the knowledge hierarchies upside down in the service of justice for the poor.

The university of Abahlali baseMjondolo is one of thousands of larger and smaller examples of people taking action to counter knowledge asymmetry. Knowledge asymmetry occurs when the people who provide knowledge do not benefit from the gathering and organizing of that knowledge. At the heights of Occupy movement we saw the creation of 'free universities', many of which have continued and are being strengthened into regional and international networks. Traditional healers in South Africa have formed a traditional knowledge commons in Mpumalanga Province. In India, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, an NGO doing co-construction of knowledge with the rural and urban poor is now being asked for advice on higher education advice by the national planning commission of India.

These knowledge innovators have all facilitated various means of creating, sharing and accessing knowledge that is not part of what is often called the western canon. For a variety of justice, cultural, spiritual, environmental, health reasons, the application of knowledge from the western canon in each one of these stories was seen as insufficient. The contexts, conditions, values, uses, politics of knowledge in each of these stories calls for an opening outwards of our comfortable assumptions

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about whose knowledge counts and what the relationship between knowledge and life might be.

The development of the discourse of knowledge democracy has been emerging in recent years to help us to understand the relationship of knowledge to a more equitable world for at least two reasons. First we have found the use of the concepts of the knowledge economy and the knowledge society to be wanting from the perspective of justice. Second we have seen a more general loss of confidence in the capacity of western white male euro-centric science to respond to the profound challenges of our times. As so many of us have come to feel, something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today.

Knowledge democracy refers to an interrelationship of phenomena. First, it acknowledges the importance of the existence of multiple epistemologies or ways of knowing such as organic, spiritual and land-based systems, frameworks arising from our social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded everywhere. These are sometimes referred to as subaltern knowledge. Secondly it affirms that knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony, meditation and more. Third, and fundamental to our thinking about knowledge democracy is understanding that knowledge is a powerful tool for taking action to deepen democracy and to struggle for a fairer and healthier world. Knowledge democracy is about intentionally linking values of democracy and action to the process of using knowledge.

The knowledge democracy developments are co-occurring with questions about whether institutions of higher education are capable of raising the social question in a world gone mad with economics as can be seen in the recent paper by the UK-based Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, "Inequality and Higher Education: Marketplace or Social Justice" by Prof Martin Hall, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Salford.

The space for institutional challenges and innovation can be most promisingly seen in the emergence of the community-university engagement movement. Universities in North America, Europe as well as in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been creating administrative structures for the facilitation of community-university co-construction of knowledge. In the UK, we have seen the creation of the University of Brighton's Community University Partnership Programme. In Europe, we see a maturation of 30 years of 'Science Shops'. In Canada, the University of Victoria has the Institute for the Study of Community University Engagement. In South Africa, we have new structures in all the public universities. In Malaysia, the two major universities have structures for community-university engagement. In addition we have seen the emergence of a number of global networks for the support of engagement and innovation in higher education. These include the Talloires Network, the Global Alliance for Community Engaged Research, the Global University Network for Innovation, the PASCAL Global observatory, the Living Knowledge Network, the Association of Commonwealth Universities Engagement

Network, PRIA in Asia and many others at the national and regional level. On May 13-15, 2013 in Barcelona, the leadership of all of these networks will be meeting under the auspices of GUNi on the theme of "Knowledge, Transformation and Higher Education" to advance a global agenda for action.