Against Epistemicide: Decolonising Higher Education

Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon

The geographer David Harvey uses the concept of "accumulation through dispossession" to explain how capital, the basis of our dominant economic system, began to be concentrated in a small number of hands. He draws attention to England between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, when people were removed from land they had been sharing in common. Harvey tells us of wealthy landowners who turned traditional open fields and communal pastures into private property for their own use through the creation of what became known as "enclosures." Income began to flow from the use of the land to the new land 'owners,' while those excluded were further impoverished.

Something similar has happened in the world of knowledge. Both of us have had the opportunity of spending a few days in one of the colleges of Oxford University, a college that was created at the same time as the enclosures. We entered through a low doorway that was only accessible to students, fellows and their guests. The college was walled in, and could only be acessed through two guarded entryways.

While staying there, the links between the enclosure of previously-common land for private purposes and the creation of walled places for learning became disturbingly apparent. The act of creating Oxford and other medieval universities was an act of enclosing and limiting access to knowledge, exerting a form of control, and providing a means by which a small elite could acquire knowledge for the purposes of political, spiritual, and cultural leadership and power.

Those within the walls became the knowers; those outside the walls became the non-knowers. Knowledge was removed from the land and from the relationships of those who shared in it. The enclosing of the academy dispossessed the vast majority of knowledge keepers, forever relegating their knowledge to the status of witchcraft, superstition, folk tradition, or at best some form of 'common sense.'

These new academies came into being at the same time as the rise of European science, when – through improvements in navigational aids and the wealth generated by the enclosures and the exploitation of silver and gold from Latin America - the hegemony of mostly white, Euro-centric knowledge spread around the world. Just as colonial political practices carved up the globe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, knowledge - the intellectual energy by which human beings operate - became colonized as well. This process of dispossession has been called "epistemicide", or the killing of knowledge systems, by the philosopher Boaventura de Sousa Santos.

In 2012, and as part of a wider effort to reverse this process of epistemicide, we were invited by UNESCO to create a UNESCO Chair that would focus on building research capacity in the global South on the themes of the social responsibility of universities, and community-based research. From this new base, we are calling on institutions of higher education to do at least four things.

First, to re-examine and reinvigorate debates about what constitutes knowledge in the academy, and whose knowledge counts. Second, to re-establish the centrality of

transformation in a world that everyday grows more unequal, more unloving, and less sustainable. Third, to create structures and processes for the co-creation of knowledge with social movements and civil society partners. And fourth, to adhere to the principles of open access to all knowledge created, free of charge.

Bio: Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon share the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. Rajesh is in addition the founding President of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia based in New Delhi, India while Budd is a Professor of Community Development at the University of Victoria in Canada