



The 4D List: Knowledge Production of Difference, Diversity, Decolonization, and Destruction

by Carsten Junker

As the editors of this special issue note, a “desire to combat Eurocentrism and the dominance of Euro-American epistemologies in global knowledge production has been pronounced at least since the second half of the twentieth century” (“Controlling” 2017). While there may be a consensus about this desire among numerous engaged intellectuals whose work is dedicated to a critical analysis and rejection of the hegemony of what Walter Dignolo calls a “European ancestry that was sold to us as modernity” (2014:48), there is by no means a general agreement as to what consequences should be drawn from this desire and what actions should be taken in the future—in other words, how this hegemony should in actuality be combatted. The wide range of possible answers to this call for combat may be captured by a number of keywords that also serve as structuring elements for the short contribution at hand, which is informed by critical debates in (North) American Studies, the field in which I locate myself:

- a) the consideration of an epistemological shift toward **differences** within and between knowledge objects and subjects;
- b) the implementation of **diversity** both among knowledge producers and in curricula;
- c) the **decolonization** of orders of knowledge; and
- d) a movement toward **destruction**, an ultimate “call for the end of the world” (Wilderson 2010:8).

Difference

When I entered American Studies as a student in Berlin in the 1990s, the so-called New Americanists had begun to shape the field (see Paul:23-25). They built on the work of scholars who had sought to overcome a Cold-War narrative of American exceptionalism, a nation-based focus on the United States that had validated the country’s superior role as messenger of Western democracy. What made American Studies so attractive to me and my fellow students was a deep interest in differences within the nation—institutionalized in the wake of the social movements which had led to a thorough restructuring of curricula—and a more recent critical focus on the role of the United States as an imperial state and on phenomena of Americanization gone awry. We knew of no other interdisciplinary place in German academe where “differences” and heterogeneity were so validated and where a relentless critique of power structures had become a prerequisite for good

and appreciated work. To my knowledge, no other field thrust such critical tools at its practitioners. Even more, these tools facilitated a critical reflection on how subjects were positioned in complex ways on a spectrum ranging from center to margins in relation to a Western and Northern canon of knowledge: from critical race theory including so-called critical whiteness studies, to gender studies and queer theory, a wide range of approaches were leaving a mark on the field. The title of an influential article by public intellectual Cornell West (1990), “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” put the agenda of the time in the fewest possible words.

Diversity

Such discussions around the politics of difference both reflected and pushed for an increasing diversification of students and faculty in institutions of higher education. The demand that universities should represent the demographic diversity of society has also translated into calls for the implementation of “diversity” at German academic institutions. While “diversity management” has been associated with private companies and their goals of capitalizing on diversity for the sake of innovation and financial gains, social economists also consider and put forward other arguments for the implementation of diversity in institutions of higher education: these arguments relate to dimensions of higher efficiency in heterogeneous study and research groups, dimensions of fairness in overcoming discriminatory practices, and dimensions of representing the diversity of a population on all levels of public institutions such as the university. Most importantly and in the broadest terms, these arguments address dimensions of learning for life: forming personalities through lived diversity in order to educate citizens for leadership roles in democratic societies shaped by global immigration (see Grözinger and Langholz-Kaiser 2018:199–200).

But this affirmation of diversity—easily prone to misunderstanding as a happy-go-lucky multiculturalism—also implies crucial challenges and pressing problems which were already becoming visible in the academic debates over a celebratory politics of difference. Epistemologically, a proliferation of analytical categories of difference—corresponding to categories of social differentiation—called for a reflection of the status and interrelatedness of these categories: how does “race” relate to “gender” (Crenshaw 1989) and where does “class” fit in (Collins 1993), Black feminist scholars were asking; what about “sexuality,” “ability,” “age,” et cetera? What about the “etc.” (Butler 1990:143)? How do producers of knowledge shape their objects of knowledge? As an interdisciplinary endeavor, American Studies could go to concepts of feminist epistemology for answers, such as standpoint theory (Harding 2004) and reflections on situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). More questions became apparent with respect to the diversification of curricula: what remains as common ground for scholars whose work moves into ever more fragmented subfields of specialization? A preliminary answer could be found through the lens of ethics, and this, it seemed, referred us back to the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality and its promises; however, Enlightenment reason had also facilitated the violent histories of fascism, colonialism, and enslavement. And moreover: how could these categories that had emerged out of post-protest U.S. American contexts be translated into German contexts shaped by the country’s unification and, more recently, global migration—at universities that, for the most part, are situated in a European tradition of Enlightenment pedagogy?

Decoloniality

Against this backdrop, let me take up thoughts Sabine Broeck and I developed in a working paper that came out of a conference contribution at Walter Mignolo’s invitation to the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University in 2010, in which we called for “a decolonial epistemology of pedagogy for higher education” (Junker and Broeck 2010). We identified, not least from our own personal experiences, that demographic classroom makeups at German universities lagged far behind the racial and ethnic composition of German society. We also formulated, for the time being, a pedagogical call to move beyond an ethnographic desire to learn about non-white “others” and instead make inroads in a self-critical approach to white hegemonic knowledge production. While we acknowledged that this might re-center white Eurocentric hegemony as a primary focus of attention, it seemed to us a viable strategy for redistributing epistemic privileges and

acknowledging the opportunities afforded by a positional surrender of a-priori entitlements. We called for a “didactic shift to an *eros of conflict, friction, irritation* which teaches the sustenance of white discomfort,” noting that pedagogical difficulties might arise from avoiding what we termed a “pedagogy of guilt” in favor of a “pedagogy of accountability” (Junker and Broeck 2010, emphasis in original). Such an agenda requires a re-reading of the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality as intricately tied to the unfreedom, historically speaking, of the colonized and the enslaved. It is an agenda that also involves an attitude of humility toward the authoritative knowledge of those for whom the historical past of colonization and enslavement is still felt in the present (see Hartman 2007:133). In often overwhelmingly white German teaching and learning environments, the relevance of such attempts at pedagogical reflection and action—in the spirit of what Mignolo calls “decoloniality” or “decolonial thinking and doing” (2014:26)—continues to be all too apparent.

In a recent public talk about the legacy of the work of the great African-American public intellectual, political activist, and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), outstanding public intellectual and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulated her preference for the term “affirmative sabotage” over the term “deconstruction,” as a substitute concept for denoting the critical procedures of thinking inside a given discursive structure to dismantle it from within. In an interview published by the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*, Spivak elaborates on this notion of “affirmative sabotage.” Asked to explain whether she refers to subverting a specifically imperialist discourse, or other hegemonic discourses as well, she replies: “I used the term sabotage because it referred to the deliberate ruining of the master’s machine from the inside. The idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticising fully, so that you can turn it around from inside because the only way you can sabotage something is when you are working intimately with it” (qtd. in Brohi 2014). Spivak here clearly reworks—and subverts—Audre Lorde’s (1984) proverbial phrase: “the master’s tools can never dismantle the master’s house.” As a self-identified Black lesbian feminist, Lorde was speaking to those who could not occupy positions in the “master’s house,” but whom she encouraged to turn markers of exclusion into forceful weapons of self-empowerment instead. Lorde’s dictum, importantly, is formulated in an essay in which she strongly criticizes the white, heteronormative, and middle-class biases of a feminist conference at the New York University Institute for the Humanities, to which she had been invited as a panelist. While Lorde was in fact criticizing the academy from within, she noted that she was structurally excluded from it.

Destruction

Frank Wilderson—an outspoken protagonist of the current school of Afro-pessimist thinking, according to which Western civil societies strive at the expense of Black people’s lives—has recently reminded his readers not only of the fact that everyone produces knowledge from where they are located in the world, but also that the social positioning of those doing critical work heavily impacts upon the consequences they might draw for themselves from their intellectual labor. As far as white people engaging in Afro-pessimism are concerned, the dilemma, as he observes it, amounts to “a kind of problem of being because ultimately the work is moving towards the destruction of the very academic who’s doing the work.” (2016:9). Put differently, to assume that the epistemologies of Western and Northern modernity have been built on and intricately tied to historical processes of colonization and enslavement, the legacies of which can still be detected, entails the realization that a rejection of those very destructive processes also calls for a disavowal, if not “destruction,” of these late-modern apparatuses of epistemology, including its actors. This may bespeak a polemical stance rather than a call to action. But it is invested in stressing ongoing structural inequalities inside and outside the academy and refuting notions that racism is a thing of the past. For me as a white scholar in the field of North American Studies, Afro-pessimism is a discourse position that seems impossible and undesirable to bypass because it offers a conceptual framework that relates the foundational core ideals of Enlightenment modernity—freedom, equality, and progress—to their constitutive flip side. Since these ideals resound today and continue to have an alluring ring to them in Western and Northern institutional frameworks, it remains imperative to interrogate the complexities that made them thinkable in the first place. Engaged intellectuals like Spivak, Lorde, and Wilderson will continue to invite their audiences to take up the task of this interrogation.

Difference, diversity, decolonization, and destruction: these keywords compose a 4D list that provides answers to “[t]he desire to combat [E]urocentrism and the dominance of Euro-American epistemologies in global knowledge production” (“Controlling” 2017). **Desire** itself takes on the task of a metaD: it prompts a reflection on what drives, facilitates, and necessitates the attitudes and actions associated with the four concepts. Desire as metaD gestures toward the affective dimensions that connect the items on the 4D list.

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