

The Global (De) Centre (GDC) is a platform which aspires to bring together a network of humanists and social scientists; artists, writers, musicians, and filmmakers; creative managers, such as curators and publishers; and activists to produce, disseminate, and act upon knowledge in more inclusive ways. Although we talk a lot about globalizing higher education, we believe that, in many cases, not enough has changed about our research and teaching. Much of what is taught in universities is still very much determined by local or Western knowledge. Western journals, conferences, and funding still dominate our scholarly conversations.

By training ourselves and our students about ways of asking and answering questions from all parts of the world (which may or may not be called theory), developing critical pedagogies, making on-line curricular materials from across the globe available, and partnering with a range of innovative, unexpected institutions to do creative, provocative interventions, we hope to bring what have been alternative epistemologies and ways of producing knowledge into the center and to help to create new ones.

We believe that transforming the academy will not be truly possible if we stay within the Ivory Tower. That is why, in the future, we hope to broaden our activities to include practitioners, activists, artists, curators and other creatives who, like scholars, produce knowledge and alternative readings of contemporary social processes and help us to imagine alternative futures. Many of us already work with partners outside the academy on an individual basis. Our goal is to organize a more systematic and collective conversation between different kinds of knowledge producers. We hope to bring together a truly interdisciplinary set of voices who can twist, disrupt and decenter the current xenophobic, nationalistic and racist climate and work toward creating a more open, tolerant and diverse world without physical, mental and economic borders.

Our intellectual and political project is framed with a clear eye toward the current geopolitical moment. In addition to rising populism and xenophobia, we see a transnational class of professionals who move and earn freely and enjoy multiple memberships and protections. We also see increasing numbers who cannot move or, when they do, are relegated to positions of permanent impermanence, without rights, protections, or representation. We see social welfare entitlements shrinking and the proliferation of precarious, low paying jobs. Some say we are living in a post-growth moment, in which countries seeking alternative post-modernities must come to grips with their declining demography, shrinking economies, and unsustainable practices. Others argue that we are experiencing a loss of legitimacy in 'democratic' institutions and the notions of rights and justice. It is not just that historical and social scientific accounts must be rewritten with eyes and ears no longer blurred by colonialist assumptions. It is that, moving forward, we need new categories that interrogate the appropriate space, time, or identity to be considered to truly understand social life rather than taking them for granted. After all, how can we create a better world if we don't understand the assumptions and genealogies of the tools we use to imagine and create it?

We do not aspire to create a bricks and mortar center. Rather, we envision a virtual community, with a rotating coordinating committee, that can agilely and inexpensively respond to opportunities and resources as they arise. We will use what resources we have to create a loose but broad tent that includes senior and junior, theorists and practitioners, creators and critics. We are concerned that many students around the world are still being trained according to outdated models using out-of-date methods based on a limited theoretical and regional range and on a narrow historical scope. One of our key focii, therefore, is not only to ask new questions, and use new categories and methods to answer them, but to train the next generation of scholars to take up this mantle and run. We also see ourselves as modeling a "guerilla approach" to research and scholarship. By that we mean that we will do a lot with few resources. While generous funding is wonderful, the lack of large grants should

not stop us from convening meetings, conducting research, or creating exhibitions. We believe that the impact of a series of short-term, more modest, creatively-convened collaborative interventions adds up.

Clearly, we are not the first group to take up this charge. What makes us different, we believe, is that we are trying to create a truly international network, that does not just include scholars from the US and Europe. We want to be genuinely interdisciplinary in that, in addition to including a range of academics, we will also work with creative producers, managers, and activists. Finally, we pledge to reconstruct as well as deconstruct. From our perspective, too many interventions stop at critique, without charting a constructive way forward. Thus, we strive to leave behind “no, but...” and embrace a “yes, and...” perspective.

The Global (De)Centre began nearly two years ago with an organizational meeting in Amsterdam. Since then, we held our first summer school at the Central European University in Budapest in Summer 2018. We are now working to organize winter schools in Toledo, Spain (2020), Beirut, Lebanon (2021), and Seoul, South Korea (2022).¹ We also held a second meeting in Berlin in 2018 which was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Ethnic and Religious Diversity. There, we created a collective tool-kit for decentering knowledge production and practice and we began creating our on-line resource-sharing platform.

In the following paragraphs, we place our project more firmly in context before outlining our specific goals.

¹ Please note that we currently have no operating budget and members have paid their own way to our meetings. While we are strongly committed to hosting events outside the Global North, so far, we have taken advantage of opportunities where we could easily and inexpensively convene them with an eye toward expanding our global reach in the future.

POLITICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKDROP

Nearly one billion people (or roughly one out of every seven people in the world today) are moving within (internal migration) or beyond nation-state boundaries (international migration) either by choice or by force, with great success or great struggle. At the same time, the rise of anti-immigrant, nationalistic leaders, such as Duterte in the Philippines, Trump in the US, or Bolsonaro in Brazil are just one of many indications of rising populism and xenophobia and increasing efforts to thwart mobility, especially among refugees, the poor and unskilled.

These dynamics have political and institutional consequences. They challenge long-standing assumptions about how people live and work and about how social institutions function—how and where individuals raise children and care for the elderly; how class, race, and gender are constituted; how livelihoods are earned; the multiple communities with which people identify; what categories such as “development,” “social inclusion,” and “Global North” or “Global South” actually mean; and where the rights and responsibilities of citizenship get fulfilled. They bring into focus new scales and sites of governance—drawing our attention to increasingly important regional and supranational institutions that attempt to harmonize but often create new forms of social exclusion instead. They demand that we look closely at how nations and migration are purposely produced by state policies, institutions, and categories aimed at creating “stable” units and unstable flows. They produce societies that are more and more diverse – racially, ethnically, and religiously but also in terms of membership and rights—creating newly privileged groups and excluding others.

The fluid 1990s global conceptual lexicon to which many of us contributed (including expectations of flows, networks, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism) is out-of-sync with current realities and much more possible for some racial and economic groups than for others. Much of mainstream scholarship on migration, race, and ethnicity is also off key because it still relies

unreflexively on old categories, without considering their intellectual genealogies or the assumptions about space, scale, and values upon which they are based. We need to be clear about the assumptions underlying the knowledge we have about the world, who produces it and how, and whose interests it serves. What is silenced and what is amplified? What is obscured, hiding in plain sight, or given centre stage? Not only is the question about what we understand by excavating these embedded assumptions. It is also about how to create new words and new methods that do not repeat the same mistakes.

We build on the work of many who came before us by trying to extend it in four key ways: by mounting a truly interdisciplinary conversation around a clear set of shared questions; by going beyond deconstruction to reconstruction; by bringing in new insights, epistemologies, and engaging in a conversation between partners from all regions of the globe; and by modeling ways to move forward despite limited resources. Let us say a bit about each in turn.

There is a large and rich body of work from critical theory and post-colonial scholars that tries to do much of the intellectual work we propose. Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Gyatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Talal Asad, to name a few, all wrote compellingly about the need to “provincialize Europe” not in the sense of shifting their attention from Europe to “elsewhere,” but in calling attention to the ways that European and American theoretical formations are promoted as general, universal theories and to the broad effects of these universalizing theories. Chakrabarty, in particular, argues that the development of European secular history as a natural, a-theoretical time (without its own history of development) has made all other concepts of history, including religious histories, appear secondary or derivative. The purpose of critique is not to reject “Northern” theories and replace them with others, or to “fill out” our theoretical armature to include alternative points of view in ways that fail to look the shaping power of these dominant theories in the face. While a proliferation of theoretical views may result, the immediate focus of “provincializing” Europe is to suture the particular historical conditions of its theoretical projects back onto those theories, so that scholars and others will be able to evaluate these theories

along the same lines as other theories not generally thought of as universalizable. Therefore, the true decentralization of scientific and analytical knowledge requires recognizing and legitimating other knowledge and other histories produced beyond this European axis. We see this as taking at least three forms: the knowledge we need to *create* a more equitable, just, and sustainable world; the knowledge we need to *understand* such things as the universe, humanity and human relations; and the knowledge we need to *translate or vernacularize* across languages, epistemologies, and cultural contexts that fosters rather than impedes understanding.

This call has been taken up by different disciplines to varying degrees—comparative literature, religious studies, anthropology while leaving others, such as political science and sociology, largely untouched. Part of our agenda is to bring thinkers from different fields, who are more or less steeped in these insights, to take up this challenge. It is to deprovincialize across disciplines and, thereby, to shrink the epistemological distance between the North and the South and what have been the centers and peripheries of knowledge production.

But we also want to go further, to deconstruct but also to reconstruct. It is not enough to rewrite old histories and theories and to show what they have missed (although these are important steps forward). We also have to come up with new vocabularies and new analytical tools that help us to fundamentally reformulate our questions, not simply to ask them in different ways in different contexts. Debates about social inclusion in Europe or assimilation in the United States, for example, may recognize the value judgements and the expectations about conformity upon which they are based. But they grow out of the idea of an individual who settles definitively in one, bounded nation-state. They are still based on the idea that settlement, boundedness and rootedness is the norm rather than mobility and connection. The fundamental assumptions organizing the conversation have not changed.

When we move beyond a Eurocentric or American focus, what do we see? Here again, we are standing on the shoulders of giants. Raewyn Connell,

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Ramon Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo, Jean and John Camaroff, and Syed Farid Alatas have all proposed alternative epistemologies. Yet because these conversations often take place in languages other than English, they remain outside many scholarly discussions. The view from another standpoint quickly calls the allegedly universal into question. The Caribbean scholar might completely dismiss debates about assimilation coming from a context in which migration or movement between islands for economic and social reasons is so commonplace that it does not merit a unique label of its own. Creating a truly global network that goes beyond each of our normal “casts of characters” is no easy feat. It is expensive and logistically complicated to collaborate with people across the globe. It may lead us out of our respective comfort zones. But, clearly, we must. A global world requires global knowledge production.

The goal of our work is to understand the encounters between migrating people and migrating culture, how they are negotiated, the ensuing outcomes, and how they change our understanding of the “national” (i.e. identities, membership, citizenship, educational systems, arts and culture, etc.) and go beyond it. These entanglements also result from the diffusion and stretching of models, frameworks, structures, institutions, epistemologies, etc. across borders. Sometimes these things actually move and sometimes borders, individuals (or some segments of the population) and institutions stay in place (sometimes even borders move over people who do not move). One piece of our collective agenda, then, is to understand and unpack the iterative relationship between what we think of as the national and the transnational, and all the layers of social experience in between. We want to see how these are mutually intertwined, in tension, complementary, and more or less inclusive as a result of these multi-sited, multi-scalar negotiations. We consider a dialectics of making and unmaking, of enabling and disabling, of both material and ideological infrastructures.

MOVING FORWARD

The intellectual journey we propose requires fundamentally shifting the starting points and frames used in most current research and policy-making. That means not only including voices from across the globe and translating across linguistic and cultural spaces but trying to give them equal weight. It also means bringing into sharp focus what gets hidden by the assumptions underlying the categories we currently use.

What we are proposing, therefore, is not just to think outside the nation-state box but also: (1) to take mobility, connection, and permeability as our starting points rather than assuming that social life takes place in discrete, static, and rooted containers (while paying close attention to people, ideas, and goods that get blocked, and analyzing the dynamics of circulation and vernacularization), (2) to consider the wide range of outcomes of migration beyond permanent settlement. How do institutional structures, categories, and policies create classes of the permanently impermanent and what new institutional forms and arrangements are emerging in response? What kinds of political stratification does this give rise to? (3) to take regional variation seriously by studying how different migration trajectories and diversity management regimes are produced in different regions, how different regions are inserted differently into global political, economic, and cultural hierarchies, and how the tension between the urban, the nation and the world is managed accordingly, (4) to integrate culture centrally into our analyses because all fundamental social change requires changes in actors' and institutions' discourses and imaginaries, (5) to consider space and scale and the ways in global institutions (i.e. Education City in Qatar with its 8 US and UK universities, Museum Island in Abu Dhabi, the many art fairs and biennales that take place around the world each year, or transnational corporate headquarters) curate space and influence knowledge production by purposefully bringing together certain sets of actors, and (6) to prioritize connections between researchers, artists of all kinds, practitioners, and activists, and stress the practical and policy applications of our work.

Our goal is not to create an actual physical space but, in fact, to invent and experiment with new collaborative models that enable more inclusive egalitarian participation across geographic and academic divides. So far, we envision a loosely constituted, ever expanding network, that allows its members to collectively train and supervise graduate students, exchange teaching and research materials, and conduct collaborative research. We believe it is possible to do this with limited resources—that we do not have to be hindered because we do not have large grants, an established center, or the constant energy and time needed to sustain them. Instead, we want to show how much can be done by taking advantage of all kinds of opportunities that arise, such as building upon trips for other purposes to generate activities and partnerships for the GDC, and making use of the positive possibilities of new global communication technologies. By doing so, we hope to model “guerilla research,” and inspire others to take up seemingly impossible tasks that nevertheless need to be done.

Some of the activities we envision are:

- a. Yearly Summer School – We believe that a key piece of our project is (re)training the next generation of scholars and working closely with them to develop our ideas. Toward that end, we organized our first PhD summer school at the Central European University in Budapest during the summer of 2018. We hope to organize similar summer or winter schools each year. Plans are currently underway for a winter school in Toledo, Spain in 2020, a winter school in Beirut, Lebanon in 2021, and a summer school on new museologies in Seoul, South Korea in 2022. While each will focus on a different theme, depending on the interests of the host institution, they will always be tied to our larger agenda of creating de-centered, de-colonialized knowledge about questions of mobility, culture, and difference and new concepts and methods for studying them.
- b. Yearly Conference - We hope to hold an annual gathering, both to foster relations between members but also to create exemplars of the kind of scholarship we are imagining. At our second meeting, for example, we mapped out a future collaborative research project that would compare

humanities and social science curriculum around the world and a strategy for producing podcasts and interviews with key thinkers that we will make available as teaching materials on line. This December, we will partner with the Hong Kong Baptist University to organize a conference on social theory from an Asian perspective. We hope to host a similar conference on African epistemologies in spring 2020 at the Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

- c. Critical Pedagogies - Two of our members will pilot a course on critical pedagogies and inclusive epistemologies for students in the U.S. and Brazil this fall.
- d. Creative Collaborations – We are working with the MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt) in Hamburg, on a scholarly and curatorial project about the museum of the future.