

Academic Standards or Academic Imperialism? Zimbabwean perceptions of hegemonic power in the global construction of knowledge

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Abstract: University cultures in the Global North generate powerful definitions of what constitutes “knowledge” and “good research.” When we ask who gets to represent the “African perspective,” we find it is decreasingly an African. This article argues that resource inequalities alone cannot explain this exclusion of African scholarship. Hegemonic academic standards undervalue the more positivist research orientation found in southern African universities. The struggle is not over the validity of that orientation, but over who has the power to validate it. This analysis is based upon interviews with senior university research managers in Zimbabwe and on a public roundtable on Structural Inequalities in Global Academic Publishing.

Résumé: Les cultures universitaires de l’hémisphère nord produisent des définitions influentes sur ce qui constitue la « connaissance » et la « bonne recherche ». Lorsque nous demandons qui représente la « perspective africaine », nous constatons qu’il est de moins en moins africain. Cet article soutient que les inégalités de ressources ne peuvent à elles seules expliquer cette exclusion de l’érudition africaine. Les normes universitaires hégémoniques sous-estiment l’orientation plus positiviste de la recherche dans les universités d’Afrique du sud. La lutte ne porte pas sur la validité de cette orientation, mais sur qui a le pouvoir de la valider. Cette analyse est

African Studies Review, Volume 61, Number 2 (July 2018), pp. 8–27

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doi:10.1017/asr.2017.132

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basée sur des entretiens avec de hauts responsables de la recherche universitaire au Zimbabwe et sur une table ronde publique sur les inégalités structurelles dans la publication académique mondiale.

Keywords: academic publishing; Zimbabwe; hegemony; decolonizing the academy; constructions of knowledge

Over the past decades, postcolonial approaches to the study of Africa have become embedded in all the leading higher education institutions in the U.K. and the U.S. When we look at African studies in the Global North (in which I include the settler colonial nations of Australia and New Zealand), it seems that everyone is claiming to take African perspectives seriously. All respected/respectable Africanists working in the Global North recognize that the colonial imposition of policies and interpretations on Africa was limited and limiting and acknowledge the need to seek out local voices and interpretations. And yet the study of Africa is dominated by the work of people who were trained—or, at least, who work—elsewhere. Africans and their voices struggle for recognition. So why do African-based academics not dominate the field?

University cultures in the Global North generate powerful definitions of what constitutes “knowledge” and “good research.” These definitions, it seems, tend to undervalue African-based research, although it is challenging to understand how and why. This article explores that control over the generation of “authoritative” knowledge. It considers why the power to define authoritative knowledge lies in the Global North, and whether epistemological factors—ideas about what knowledge is, and how it should be generated—play some part in the under-recognition of African scholarship.

In thinking about this problem, it is important to pay attention to hegemony: there is no overt or conscious desire to exclude African voices. The opposite is often true. But this article will argue that alongside different institutional cultures of research in African universities, there are also structural biases towards work produced in the Global North, which contribute to the marginalization of African-based work. This article examines how these power relationships play out within Zimbabwe, a state with high-quality research universities and many research-active academics. It is based upon interviews in July 2015 with senior university research managers, faculty deans, and academic staff in Zimbabwe; it also draws from a public roundtable that I convened with the South Africa Political Economy Series (SAPES) in Harare on the subject of structural inequalities in global academic publishing. The seminar was well-attended by Zimbabweans working in the social sciences and humanities both within Zimbabwe and in the Diaspora.

Geographies of Knowledge: High Impact, Low Impact

Global academic knowledge is primarily constructed through journal articles. Publication in some journals is considered more prestigious than publication

in others, with journals from the Global North having higher status than journals from the African continent. As Akosua Adomako Ampofo observed in a recent edition of *African Studies Review*:

Since American and European journals are prized, African scholars both on the continent and in the diaspora seek to publish in these ‘high impact’ journals to gain tenure. (Ampofo 2016:17)

“High impact” is assessed in diverse ways, but it is always linked to claims about authority, quality, and scholarly standards. Within Europe and southern Africa, the “impact factor” metric is a standard measure by which to assess the status of a journal. “Impact factor” is a measure of the frequency with which the average article in a journal has been cited in indexed journals a particular year. “Indexed journals” are those publications included in indexes such as Web of Knowledge, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The journals in these indexes are the titles used by the producers of citation reports, most notably Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports. Citations in non-indexed journals do not count, regardless of how many times an article may be cited in these non-indexed publications.

There is a “staggering inequality” in the global distribution of indexed journals—that is, the journals in which the citations for impact factor (IF) are counted (Graham et al. 2011). The U.K. and the U.S. publish more indexed journals than the rest of the world combined. Western Europe is also well represented, but the rest of the world is barely present. Switzerland alone is represented at three times the level of the entire African continent. Moreover, journals published in the U.K. and the U.S. also have much higher impact factors—that is, publish more articles that are cited in indexed journals—than the rest of the world, despite the number and diversity of journals published in other countries (Graham et al. 2011).

Why does this matter? As with all systems for assessing the status of journals, “impact factor” is a somewhat meaningless and easily manipulable standard (van Wesel 2016). It was originally designed to help librarians make decisions regarding purchasing and subscriptions, yet its simple measurability has made it attractive to managers within the increasingly neoliberal world of higher education who are seeking metrics for setting targets and measuring performance (Garfield 1955; Garfield 2006). This, in turn, may lead journal editors and publishers to give too much weight to impact factor when making decisions about the scope and content of their publications (Testa 2015:4). On one level, then, the metric matters because money follows impact factor:

[T]he impact factors of journals have been used to decide whether or not authors get promoted, are given tenure or are offered a position in a department, or are awarded a grant. In some countries, government funding of entire institutions is dependent on the number of publications in journals with high impact factors. (PLoS 2006)

Research bodies, including those making decisions about allocations of state funds, do not want to support work that is deemed to have no impact and which may never be read. Higher education institutions making decisions about promotions, in Zimbabwe as well as elsewhere, use publication of high IF articles, or articles in high IF journals, as a way of winnowing out candidates and rewarding those who are likely to be recognized widely within the academy (Chinamasa 2014).

However, the main concern in this article is that impact factor and similar metrics also matter because they influence whose understandings and interpretations of the world are viewed as significant and relevant. If research from the Global South, and specifically research from Africa, is not published and/or cited in high impact journals, and if journals published in Africa are not included in the list of indexed journals, then research from the Global South can seem marginal and of less importance/quality than research from the Global North, and particularly from the U.S. and the U.K. As Ryan C. Briggs and Scott Weathers demonstrated in a recent article in *African Affairs*, research from the Global South is under-recognized, even when published in high-status journals. They observe that “citation gaps show that certain voices do not command attention. Put simply, some kinds of authors may make it into major journals but still not influence the literature in the way their peers do.” (Briggs & Weathers 2016:460). The problem, then, is not simply that publications from the South are poorly represented in the calculation of impact. *Writers* from the South are sparsely published in the “high impact” journals and poorly represented in citations, with the result that African voices are muted.

Articles on Africa in top-ranked journals are not often written by Africans, and particularly not by black Africans (Hountondji 2009; Mkandawire 2011). At one time, this could have been explained by the paucity of African scholars. There has not been a shortage of African academics for many decades, however, and the citation disparity is getting worse, despite the growing number of well-qualified African scholars carrying out research (Briggs & Weathers 2016:477), in Zimbabwe as elsewhere. Small changes are being made, but overall the “experts” on Africa remain people from elsewhere, or at least people who are based elsewhere. As Ampofo (2016) noted, the 2013 *Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* had no African authors among its twenty-six contributors. Although outsider perspectives are useful, U.S.-born historians would find it difficult to tolerate a situation in which the majority of scholars recognized as producing the canonical works of U.S. history were African. Yet in Africa, this is the norm: scholars from Africa are rarely deemed to be the world experts on their own nations.¹

We need to understand the reasons for this under-representation, if we are to identify effective ways to challenge it. Briggs and Weathers suggest that, “It is possible that articles with African authors are using different ontologies, epistemologies, or simply asking different questions from other academics, and that these differences may be influencing citation patterns” (2016:485). As metrics provide too blunt a tool to be able to demonstrate,

much less confirm this, the authors did not pursue this concept further. Here, I try to use *qualitative* data, based on consultation work in Zimbabwe and experience on the editorial board of the U.K.-based *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS), to argue that different epistemologies are indeed significant in the marginalization of submissions from Zimbabwe and elsewhere in the southern African region.

Privileged Academic Registers: A Discourse of Standards

Many high-status journals recognize the dangers of elitism and Eurocentrism and adopt policies of positive discrimination towards submissions from scholars from Africa, pursuing various strategies to this end. For example, my experience with JSAS has been that the board members have worked hard for many years to ensure free access to the journal for scholars in southern Africa; to run writing workshops at conferences in the region to help scholars develop work for publication; to recruit academics from the region onto its Advisory Board to read submissions; and to organize conferences in the region to encourage submissions of work from local scholars. Moreover, there is a policy of positive discrimination towards submissions from African-based scholars, so that papers in need of a significant amount of editorial input are accepted subjected to major revision, whereas papers requiring equivalent levels of work and revision might be rejected if submitted from established scholars in metropolitan centers.

Significantly, there were more articles from scholars based in South Africa in JSAS in the period 2005–15 than from any other nation. Predictably, the U.K., the USA, and Canada represent the next most-published places of origin. But scholars from Zimbabwe then appear equally ranked alongside Germany and the Netherlands, with Botswana only just behind.

This might imply that there is no problem: that the under-representation of African scholars can be resolved by creative interventions by journal editors. However, many of the Zimbabwean contributors to JSAS are not based in Zimbabwe: their submissions come from locations in the Global North. Rejection of papers originating in southern Africa, by comparison with papers from the Global North, continues to be disproportionately high. These rejections are based on a set of standards that readers and editors argue must be met for publication in a top-ranked journal. Discussion with Zimbabwean academics working both in Zimbabwe and elsewhere suggests that these ideas about “standards” are significant. “Standards” can be seen as a form of hegemonic discourse, privileging some forms of knowledge production over others.

While economic injustice—unequal access to resources—is acknowledged as self-evident in the world of postcolonial academia, the potential for *hegemonic* injustice is less often recognized or acted upon in practice. The problem with hegemonic systems is that they are very hard to identify: their “universal” standards and norms appear, precisely, as universal and common sense. I suggest, however, that in understanding what happens in

global academic publishing, we may also want to look at this discourse of standards. High academic standards, in a classically hegemonic manner, are regarded as self-evidently universal, providing the benchmark against which all articles can be assessed fairly.

Of course, there are good reasons why academic writing standards have become the global benchmark for research excellence in arts and humanities. Effective writing styles are important for the communication and dissemination of ideas: they ensure that the reader has to do as little work as possible to understand the argument and the evidence on which it is based. Carole Pearce and Roger Stringer are two of the leading editors of academic material in Zimbabwe. They work with material not only from the region, but from across the world, much of which is destined to be published in top-ranked journals. Both expressed concern to me that standards of academic writing from southern Africa are in decline (Pearce pers. comm., July 22, 2015; Stringer, *SAPES* 2015). In particular, they have noticed how much of the copy they receive is poorly referenced, with inaccuracies and incomplete data, and how the rules of rhetoric that are routinely taught to undergraduates in the USA are poorly applied in writing from the region. There may be various reasons for this decline, reflecting an increased volume of work, from a more diverse range of academics, being offered for publication. The key point here is that the “standards” have unarguable value. Recognized academic standards of this sort provide a clear set of guidelines against which rejections and acceptances can be justified.

Nonetheless, the dominant standards in academic writing may also include ideas about rhetoric, style, and protocol that are less universal. Within southern Africa, there are rhetorical features in southern African languages that do not translate easily to global academic discourse. The linguist and Dean of Arts at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), Prof. Pedzisai Mashiri (pers. comm. July 22, 2015), observed how the etiquette of formal communication in the region, whether in English or in the vernaculars, requires use of the passive voice, and heavy dependence on circumlocution and implicitness. Both these speech patterns, essential to respectful interaction in the learning environments of southern Africa, violate the rules of academic writing and rhetoric taught in U.S. universities.

Nor are there universal ways of presenting research findings, even within the Anglo-American tradition. Although most journal articles are 7,000-10,000 words long, with an introduction, data, discussion, and conclusion, there is no agreed template of excellence. Consultancy reports and briefing papers are equally valued in certain contexts, and American social science is distinctive in that it values recapitulation in conclusions over logical culmination of argument. So neither the writing style nor the mode of presentation of findings decisively defines “good” standards of research for high-impact journals.

The global standards against which readers judge articles for top-ranked journals are therefore less about writing or presentation style than about ways of handling academic problems. The intellectual framing and thinking

in an article are more important in assessing a submission than are its use of referencing and presentation; a good editor can resolve the latter issues. High-impact journals ask their readers to consider a range of intellectual, rather than formally scholarly, matters. Attention to how theory works to illuminate empirical data, and vice versa, is implicit in the terms of reference for most reader reports.

And yet, there is much that is culturally specific about these standards: they are not even universally embedded in academia within Europe. French and Italian approaches to scholarly investigation tend to focus more on free-flowing ideas than the empirically-oriented Anglo-American tradition. It is unlikely that Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, with its leaps across missing data, absence of footnotes, and moveable periodization; or Carlo Ginzberg's essays with their collisions of allusions and their tangential conclusions, would have been acceptable to a British publisher, for example. Despite these variations, something specific endures in the scope and purpose of the academic essay in the history of the arts and humanities, combining theory and data to present a *way of thinking* about a topic.

Significantly, submissions from southern Africa are routinely judged as failing to meet these academic standards, implying a regional failure to reach universal benchmarks. This appears to suggest that academics in the Global South are for some reason less able to meet these conventions. If one accepts that these standards are universally recognized, then it would be reasonable to conclude that inadequate undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in African universities explains these failures. No doubt, disparity in resources has had an impact on the teaching and learning in higher education institutions in the southern African region, as the relative success of South African scholars in getting their work published in top-ranked journals might indicate.

However, as Doreen Massey (1984) pointed out many years ago, when there are geographical inequalities, there will also be hegemonic narratives blaming that situation on some factor that does not directly challenge the existing dispensation of power. Perhaps, rather than putting all our focus on disparities of resources, we might also give some attention to the claim that these standards are universal, when they are so clearly more concentrated in some parts of the world than others. Thinking about this geographical concentration raises questions of how quality, standards, and "citability" are defined, and by whom. In other words, we might want to begin to question the power relationships, both economic and hegemonic, that privilege certain types of scholarship (and certain groups of scholars who happen to be based in the U.K. or the U.S.) above others, and that cause journals on African studies based in the U.K. or the U.S. to have higher status than African-based journals. The problem is partly one of unequal resources, but it is also very much to do with where the power to define knowledge production lies.

A few years ago, I served as the Chair of the Program Committee for a U.S.-based conference specializing in research on the southern African region.

We put out a call for abstracts for papers on “scholarship, regardless of discipline or topic, that is evidence-based and grounded in analysis of African discourses and concepts, and which elucidates local worldviews and experience.” In other words, the call was explicitly postcolonial in its framing. We received twice as many abstracts as we could accommodate in the conference, about 10 percent from African scholars. We began to make decisions on which abstracts to accept, based on the set of academic principles set out in the call: “the contribution your paper makes to understanding significant problems in southern Africa, to furthering conceptual debates, and/or to producing new knowledge in Southern African Studies.” In each decision, we focused only on how the abstract matched up to our understanding of these standards, without paying attention to the provenance of the author. When we came to the final cut, Mhoze Chikowero, a U.S.-based Zimbabwean on the Program Coordination Committee, noted:

I am rather taken aback by the fact that this latest round of the process has eliminated all the African scholars—both established and upcoming... Questions will certainly be raised whether all those Africans who sent their abstracts can't indeed measure up to whatever canons we're using in our selections.

Clearly we had applied a set of standards that we had imagined to be universal but which had disproportionately excluded scholars from Africa, including those working in the Global North. When we returned to our decisions about the abstracts from the African scholars, we recognized patterns of rejection that indicated that scholars from Africa had some shared approaches to research which those of us trained in U.K. and U.S. universities did not share. These patterns are also seen in submissions to *JSAS*. So it was these approaches to research that I wanted to discuss with humanities and social science academics and research managers in Zimbabwe.

Patterns of Difference

Francis Musoni, a Zimbabwean historian in the History Department at the University of Kentucky, observed at the SAPES policy dialogue in Harare on July 23, 2015, that, “I was trained at UZ from undergrad to master’s level and I taught at UZ for four and a half years before I moved to the U.S., where I retrained as a PhD student and then I started teaching there. I noticed [a] difference between the way we were taught and the way we taught at UZ; and the way I was taught as a PhD student in America and the way I am trying to teach my students in the U.S. There’s a very big disjuncture there.”

On the whole, peer reviewers in the Global North believe in the impartiality and universality of their judgements. They tend to work with definitions of good research that have been embedded in their education from primary school. As we noted above, these definitions are taught as a single package, encapsulating both standards of presentation and referencing, as

well as standards regarding how questions are framed and researched. Standards of referencing, which define how knowledge should be *validated*, are pretty much universally recognized. However, I would argue that standards defining how knowledge should be *generated* are more particular. Yet academics in the Global North are not taught that there are other valid approaches to knowledge-generation. Consequently, they may make decisions to reject and marginalize the work of scholars from other traditions, all the while believing in their impartiality and internationalism. Their feedback explains that the papers did not meet the journal's standards for publication. Researchers are left with a strong sense of exclusion: that they were missing some key approach to defining and assessing the value and international significance of academic research, with which those in the Global North seemed to be very familiar.

A common reason for rejecting papers from the southern African region is that they do not use theory well. It is significant here that the complaint is not that theory is absent, or dated. Academics in southern Africa now routinely have good internet access to contemporary scholarly theory, through funded free access and faster broadband speeds (Jeater 2014). Papers rejected because they make poor use of theory are not necessarily rejected because they are not up to date with the latest ideas. Many submissions from the region already include detailed and informed accounts of current theoretical trends, often addressing fashionable thinkers from the south such as Walter D. Mignolo and Paulo Freire, or new interpretations of Foucault, Fanon, and Baudrillard. Yet typically, a paper that began with a full presentation of the tenets of postcolonial analysis was recommended for rejection by a *JSAS* reader on the grounds that "The desire to be seen as 'post-colonial' must be informed by insight into the methodological and theoretical tools of postcolonial analysis."² The key point here is *tools*. There are different understandings of the purposes and uses of theory: its use as a tool is not always foregrounded in writing coming from the southern African region. At issue is not whether theory is current, but the underlying epistemologies informing the use of that theory. And this, I think, is at the heart of the problem.

Papers on social sciences and humanities from the southern African region tend to be informed by positivist epistemologies. This approach to knowledge aims to generate empirical data about the world, rather than to generate ideas about how the world may be understood. Enocent Msindo, a Zimbabwean academic based at Rhodes University in South Africa, who has very successfully moved into the world of international academia via University of Cambridge, acknowledged that there is often limited engagement with theory in papers submitted to journals from Zimbabwean scholars. But he did not think this was because scholars were intellectually unable to meet global standards in using theory. Rather, he observed that this was because of "the extensive positivist paradigm in which scholarship in southern Africa is placed. I think in historical studies, positivism as an approach to research is very, very strong" (SAPES 2015). Not only is positivism

unfashionable in many top-ranked journals; it also leads to a very different way of using theory.

Despite many methodological differences across the social science and humanities disciplines, a set of theoretical practices unites much of the work deemed to fulfil the quality standards of top-ranked journals. In general, theory gains traction in the Global North when it addresses questions about how and why policies and ideas are formulated: there are abiding interests in epistemology and ontology, even in areas such as environmental science. Theory is not adopted as a description of the world, but as a set of questions about the world. The data generated by asking those questions can then be used to develop analysis that is specific to the research. It may reinforce existing theory, or challenge it, or generate new theoretical and critical approaches entirely. Theory *suggests* questions from which research may begin; and *is generated by* the findings of the research. These are two related but distinct processes. In neither case is theory regarded primarily as a set of propositions to be tested; it is a set of tools to be used and generated.

By contrast, for southern African scholars working within a positivist paradigm, theory tends to be treated as a proposition to be tested. Articles often begin by setting out a theory in great detail, as a set of free-standing ideas about the world; they then provide an account of research findings and conclude by assessing how the research findings fit into the theory. Although this is seen particularly in social science papers, it is also found embedded in the humanities. To reviewers based in the Global North, these papers often seem to be bolting theory on to a research project without good reason or justification. For example, I recently handled a paper discussing the teaching of “African Traditional Religion” in a Christian university in Zimbabwe. The bulk of the paper discussed theorizations of “African Traditional Religion” in a wide range of literature from across the continent. The purpose of the long theoretical section was to hone a definition of what “African Traditional Religion” *is*, in positivist terms, in order to make policy recommendations for why it should be taught in denominational universities in the region. The readers’ reports, from the Global North, rejected all of this presentation of theory and seemed bemused as to why it had been included. The readers wanted to know more about how and why local denominational universities construct *specific* understandings of indigenous belief systems. These ontological questions, about how categories of belief have been constructed in a particular local context, were not addressed at all by the authors, whose approach to knowledge generation was very different and who had different ways of classifying what counts as relevant “theory.”

Positivist approaches to theory are linked to positivist approaches to methodology. Reviewers of papers submitted to high-impact journals often also critique the methodology used by writers from the southern African region. One off-the-record comment on a paper submitted to a top-ranked journal (not *JSAS*) was that “No one should be doing this type of research anymore.” The research in question was a quantitative survey of attitudes to

social relationships amongst a group of displaced people, rooted in interview data, but lacking any element of self-reflection. The data were presented as a set of enumerated findings without discussion of what additional scholarly questions or issues these addressed. Underlying the peer reviewer's report was an assumption that gathering of data is not valid academic research in itself, as it needs a wider scholarly framing. The criticism of the paper's weakness was valid, but an understanding of why the research had seemed meaningful to the researcher was absent.

For those trained in the social sciences in Zimbabwe, quantitative data analysis is routinely the main purpose of research. There is an enduring sense that there is a "correct" methodology for social science research, which is positivist and policy-oriented. As Prof. Charity Manyeruke, the Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Zimbabwe ruefully observed, "data analysis" is always understood to mean *quantitative* data analysis. She noted that students learn a rigid way of gathering and interpreting data and are not aware that there are many other tools available. This commitment to methodological orthodoxy is rooted in training at the undergraduate level and reinforced by the practices of faculty members (pers. comm. July 21, 2015).

The Dean contrasted this with the more open explorations of practice research, where the researcher might conclude at the end that he/she has learned mostly about their own knowledge gaps. Positivist data analysis does not recognize how and why the tropes used by informants can be structured in ways that occlude what people really think and experience. Indeed, if one is accustomed to reading all articles through a positivist lens, then alternative approaches that are more interested in what we learn through the *process* of research may not even seem to be generating significant data. It is frustrating to see apparently trivial work being lauded as "groundbreaking" when one's own work is being rejected for using limiting methodology. Authors and peer reviewers may be talking past each other, each failing to recognize what the other sees as valid in their chosen methodologies.

A further frequent reason for rejecting a paper is that the findings are presented as a linear narrative, rather than as a critical analysis. Events and timelines take precedence over themes and ideas. This is considered "poor" practice in the academy of the Global North, where these linear narratives are the stuff of television and populist histories, suitable for school history books but not for academic journals. No matter how interesting the data, the focus on setting out "what happened" is not judged to be of academic significance. Significance derives from engaging with critical analysis of how these events fit into analyses of comparable events and/or what light these events might shed on wider theoretical concerns. A typical reader's report, in rejecting a paper on the trajectory of development projects in one part of southern Africa, observed that "linear narratives are not adequate for a scholarly journal: critical analysis is also needed."

In the academies of the Global South, linear narratives are often produced and valued for their own sake, as contributions to a submerged/occluded past. They are based on deep and sustained research and are

often designed to be accessible to their subjects as well as to the academy. There are parallels, perhaps, with the “women and...” histories of the 1970s in the Global North, which attempted primarily to recover women’s histories, and which were rejected by mainstream academia for lacking intellectual rigor. Yet without those histories, the subsequent development of gendered analysis would not have been possible. However, there is little understanding or investigation, at present, of the potential value of such linear narratives in laying the foundations for a postcolonial history. Academic value is only attached to work that meets the “universal standards” of the top-ranked journals.

In sum, then, we might observe that research in the southern African region, particularly outside South Africa, tends towards the use of theory as a body of knowledge rather than as a guide to practice, towards narrative as a form of explanation, and towards data rather than critique. The Deans of Social Sciences and of Arts at the University of Zimbabwe both felt that researchers in their faculties valued innovative findings, but regarded individual positioning in presenting those findings as poor style, undermining the conventions of positivist neutrality (Manyeruke, Shiri, pers. comm.). In submissions to *JSAS* from the southern African region, many scholars in the social sciences are careful to remove their own voices from their findings. Others, often working in history and political theory, carefully set out partisan premises at the start of their articles but do not use their data to argue for the validity of those premises. Instead, they present findings in a positivist way within that framework. These approaches to knowledge generation are taught and validated in the universities in Zimbabwe, but are somewhat different from the traditions of knowledge generation that are currently taught and validated in the Global North. One approach values new knowledge, while the other values new thinking.

Positivism, Policy and Global Research

For peer reviewers in the Global North, southern African traditions of knowledge generation often seem to represent poor scholarship. The standard response of the top-ranked journals is to try to wean scholars away from these traditions, with little interest in why they persist. A common position is to reject the work as weak and to explain its failings as a consequence of colonial history and continuing inequality.

This suggests that scholars cling to positivist traditions through ignorance, or through a misguided attachment to outmoded colonial educational systems. Of course, there are undoubtedly resource challenges and disparities in pedagogic practice between universities in the Global North and those in southern Africa, which might hamper awareness of new methodologies such as action research. However, colonial systems of education could not have persisted in the absence of a supporting infrastructure across multiple generations. And financial constraints can limit, but do not preclude, exposure to non-positivist/postmodernist modes of thought.

Fewer resources and colonial legacies alone would not explain the “extensive positivist paradigm” identified by Msindo.

My discussions with research managers in Zimbabwe explored whether the demands of consultancy and policy interests might explain this positivist orientation. Various commentators have examined the distorting effect upon African universities of external consultancy and policy money, particularly in the wake of structural adjustment and privatization (e.g., Mamdani 2007; Makandawire 2011). In the age of neoliberalism, globalization, and privatization, research is paid for because of its instrumental usefulness, not its critical analysis. As Issa Shivji has observed:

The requirements of funding agencies subtly discourage, if not exhibiting outright hostility to a historical, social and theoretical understanding of development, poverty and discrimination. (2007:35)

Evidence-based development policy is rooted in data research, not in theory. Consequently, we might expect that development policy demands for “useable” research would foster a more positivist research environment in the universities, prioritizing data generation over critical thinking, and consultancy work over publication in high impact journals.

Interestingly, this seemed not to be the case. Certainly, research managers in Zimbabwe are expected to align their strategies with ZimAsset, a government initiative to foster local industry and development. For Prof. Kadmiel Wekwete, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Business Development and Administration at Midlands State University in Gweru, this means that academic research must connect in some way to development issues, and that academics must find ways to communicate their findings effectively to the relevant ministries. He acknowledged that this meant dissemination beyond academic journals. Nonetheless, he was not advocating a purely policy-based approach to research, nor did he dismiss the importance of academic journals. He argued that all research was relevant to ZimAsset, including linguistics, philosophy, and history, and that there would, perforce, be some element of cross-subsidy between these arts subjects and those research areas that can more easily attract external funding (pers. comm. July 20, 2015).

This commitment to the value of research for its own sake was reflected at the highest level of research management in Zimbabwe. Prof. C. J. Chetsanga is chair of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), which sets the guidelines for quality assurance across the higher education sector in Zimbabwe. He confirmed that academic publication in high-IF peer-reviewed journals provides the primary criterion for promotion. This policy is being maintained despite some opposition from the government, which would like to see more focus on research outputs that directly serve the needs of government ministries and economic recovery. Although a positivist orientation is dominant in the universities, this is not because policy work and consultancy reports have displaced independent academic research (pers. comm. July 27, 2015).

Following these ZIMCHE guidelines, then, academic staff in the Arts faculty at University of Zimbabwe are actively discouraged from delving into consultancy work until they reach senior levels of promotion, at which point their job descriptions include evidence that they can bring in funding. At junior and middle levels, consultancy reports are not taken into account in promotion applications: only academic monographs and journal articles are considered. Across the faculty, there is a fruitful policy requiring that all teaching staff have doctoral qualifications. This undermines, at least for Zimbabwe, the suggestion discussed by Briggs and Weathers (2016:477–8), that a decline in academic qualifications in tertiary education partly accounts for the publication and citation gaps between African scholars and outsiders. Even in the Social Sciences faculty, where one might expect more staff to work on external contracts, academic journal publications and monographs are given higher priority than NGO or consultancy work (Manyeruke, pers. comm.). This orientation towards pure academic output rather than consultancies is mirrored elsewhere in the region. In South Africa, national research funding is allocated on the basis of individual success in academic publishing. Meanwhile, there is growing pressure for academics in Malawian institutions to be publishing in high-IF journals in order to gain promotion or to gain access to funding for scholarships for doctoral students (Zoe Groves, SAPES 2015). Research managers in southern Africa are fully committed to intellectual projects and research as a good in itself. Positivist orientations are not a side-effect of a consultancy-led research culture.

Moreover, on the face of it, a positivist orientation is not at all what one would expect to find in African academia. In the clichés of postcolonial thinking, Africans are holistic and spiritual rather than linear and positivist. And yet perhaps the materiality of the metaphysical and the proximity of the spiritual in vernacular epistemologies may help us to situate the dominance of positivism in academic epistemologies. In a situation where it is normal to acknowledge a material existence for the spiritual, the delineation of what *is* from what is *thought* may be less pressing. Even the most metaphysical ways of being may, at the street level, be understood in positivist terms (Jeater 2015). The scholarly resistance to positivism in the North could, then, be understood as the flip side of the scholarly resistance to belief. If so, this perhaps helps to contextualize its lack of purchase in the Global South.

Nonetheless, given that positivism originated in European enlightenment values, it is particularly striking that it remains, as Msindo says, “very, very strong” in the southern African academy. If that orientation is rooted in a tenacious local epistemology, then it cannot be uprooted by throwing more resources at researchers, but only by a struggle over the power to define knowledge. Jennifer Mohamed-Katerere, who has worked on rights and environment issues in universities in both Europe and southern Africa, argues that positivist cultures and epistemological approaches are not a sign of poor scholarship, but of a *different* scholarship, which merits global recognition. “We need,” she said, “to work with respect and dignity” (SAPES 2015).

Politics of Knowledge

Yet researchers from Zimbabwe routinely feel that their work is not being accorded that respect and dignity. Normally, journals' reader reports and rejection messages assume that their own approaches to knowledge generation are universal. Consequently, their dismissals of papers from Zimbabwe can generate misunderstandings and resentment. Reader reviews often lack respect for the intellectual contexts in which articles are generated. At the SAPES policy dialogue, Msindo observed that "The review process itself is violent... The language they use for critiquing a piece is terrible." The author of the article on "African Traditional Religion" told me that he felt profoundly undermined by the tone of some of his peer reviews, while Msindo described young scholars "that have shown me some of these things and asked, 'How do I deal with this?'... [I]f you're young and you're not experienced you're cut off and destroyed."

Of course, savage reader reports are not peculiar to reviews of contributions from African scholars. But the nature of the savagery is significant. The unreflective assumption in peer reviews that the hegemonic EuroAmerican approach to writing journal articles is the *only* approach can lead to an arrogance of tone that is deeply damaging to academic life in the Global South.

This brings us to the material fact of the people who embody the institutions of the top-ranked journals and the leading scholarly presses. For example, *JSAS* has an extensive Editorial Advisory Board of scholars based in the southern African region, many of whom comment on submissions both from the region and elsewhere. Nonetheless, across the sector, including within *JSAS*, peer reviewers continue predominantly to be people raised and trained in the Global North. In agrarian studies, for example—a topic of key concern to Zimbabwe—the editorial boards of the leading journals in the field (at the time of this writing) have no black African scholars. The Boards are composed overwhelmingly of scholars based in universities of the Global North: eleven out of twelve for the *Journal of Peasant Studies* and five out of five for *Agrarian Change*, which also has only one (white) member from an African university, the University of the Western Cape, in its international advisory board of sixty-five members. Msindo observed that, although he has himself published in many high-impact journals, he has never been asked to peer review any articles, even in areas where he has extensive expertise.

There is a perception amongst social sciences and humanities academics in Zimbabwe that publishers in the North are not really interested in engaging with their ideas, or with the intellectual traditions of the Global South, except as "voices from the south," to be treated as the Other or the Native Informant. The marginalization of academic work from the South as specialized "ethno-study" is not a new problem. It was fully dissected a whole generation ago by Paulin Hountondji (1983) and V. Y. Mudimbe (1988), and yet it persists.³ As Paul Zeleza (2002) put it in his keynote address to a *JSAS* conference in Malawi in 2000:

If unchecked, the current trends will reinforce the international intellectual division of labor, whereby African universities and social scientists will continue to import appropriate packages of ‘universal’ theory and, at best, export empirical data; to be consumers of advanced research conducted in the universities of the North.

At the SAPES seminar, Mohamed-Katerere observed how researchers from outside typically choose to engage in partnerships with researchers from the South through journal special issues. Too often, she said, these consist of locally-produced case studies, framed by two or three articles written by northern-trained “experts” that engage with the broader theoretical issues. This model reinforces both the positivist orientation of local research and the lower status that it is given in global publishing.

In the face of these problems, one approach is to develop alternative publishing systems based in the Global South. The internet hosts a plethora of Open Access journals based in Nigeria and India, which solicit paid-for submissions from African academics. Yet these journals are not indexed for impact factor. Linked to this, there are quality assurance concerns. As Msindo vividly observed, “You can’t just bring the beans and the rubbish together and then say ‘eat!’” (SAPES 2015). Moreover, this option sidesteps the question of how knowledge is valorized on the global stage. Within Africa, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is committed to developing local voices, but even CODESRIA wants to encourage Africans now working in the academic institutions of the Global North to return and mentor local researchers (CODESRIA 2016).

It does not seem, then, that local researchers feel able to ignore global hegemonic standards and set up strong parallel systems of their own. While there is a simple dichotomy between a rhetoric of “global standards” and a rhetoric of “academic imperialism,” it is clear that in the real world, the choices are more complicated. At SAPES, Francis Musoni described his own sense of ambivalence: “with this EuroAmerican hegemony...at first you say it’s academic imperialism, but then you backtrack to say, oh, but there are some [southern-based] journals that are very difficult to deal with.” Of course, researchers in the South may have interests that will lead them towards a rhetoric opposing academic imperialism, while academics in the Global North may have interests that will lead towards a rhetoric of global “standards.” These conflicting rhetorics are fought out every day, in the confident and dismissive language of peer review and the frustrated responses of local academics. This does not mean, however, that editors in the North are not acutely aware of, and unsettled by, their disproportionate access to academic power and resources, or that academics in the South do not see the value of work published in the high-IF journals. The fact that people on either side of this divide have a genuine commitment to *arguing for* “standards” or against “imperialism” does not necessarily mean that they fully *believe in* that position. Strategic arguments arise out of material

contexts, in which individuals need to negotiate conflicting interests, both for themselves and for the diverse communities to which they belong.

In other words, parallel cultures of publishing cannot obliterate the long histories of struggle over knowledge, which affect how we are all already situated within global academia. Although this essay has argued that there are distinctive approaches to research in the Global South, these become significant only because, and insofar as, they diverge from the “standards” being used by the high-IF journals. They are defined by what they are not. Enocent Msindo advocated an alternative discourse of standards at the SAPES policy dialogue, when he argued that:

We need to be firm in terms of what we should stand for intellectually. We should be able to deal with this capitalist system that has its own ways of constructing knowledge. Yet in the process don't compromise what you believe makes an intellectual at the global level.

The problem, however, is that the definition of what makes “an intellectual at the global level” is located in an already-existing history. Even if some objective yardstick could confirm the superiority of a given epistemological approach to interpreting the world, there is no neutral position from which to demonstrate that.

Nonetheless, introducing other texts into the syllabus in the global north could challenge the existing canon and the “standards” it represents. Francis Musoni made a deliberate decision in his teaching that he would only assign readings written by African authors for seminars on African issues. However, most of the texts that he had in mind were only published in Africa and his library in the U.S. reported that it could not obtain them. So he had to change his reading list. For many Africans working in the Global North, the converse is true: their books are published in the U.S. or Europe and “you can get it in the U.S., you can get it in China, but you can't get it in Nigeria, you can't get it in Zimbabwe” (Msindo, SAPES 2015).⁴ As with all challenges to hegemonic systems, it soon becomes clear how deeply they are rooted in material conditions.

But even if the U.S. institutions were to change their syllabi, and even if intellectual fashions were to change, the underlying problem in global academia remains. I have argued that the positivist approach to research in southern Africa is routinely treated as problematic by high-IF journals. However, the locus of the struggle is not over the validity of that approach, but over the power to validate it. Intellectual trends can change over time; the canon can expand, and current epistemological differences can be reconciled. Yet fundamental inequalities of power can remain broadly unchanged. For example, self-identifying “postcolonial” scholars in the north may gain kudos from adopting non-linear forms of historical presentation and claiming that this reflects an African category of thought, thereby giving it the theoretical framing that justifies it as academically respectable. African authors are not credited with a similar postmodern playfulness

when using linear narratives. The discourse of postcolonialism, rather than valorizing research from the South, has largely reinforced a long-embedded dichotomy in which research from the North is persistently deemed to be more “modern” and “relevant” than research from the South. Decisions in editorial boards about what is useful, significant, and relevant are partly intellectual critique, but they are also strategic positions in which hegemonic alliances are reinforced through appeals to shared standards.

Conclusion

Postcolonial studies are to be welcomed. But “postcolonized” knowledge is not necessarily “not-neocolonial” knowledge. When we ask who gets to represent the “African perspective,” we find it is decreasingly an African. African voices are still excluded from global knowledge production, despite the postcolonial emphasis on using categories of analysis that come *from* Africa for thinking *about* Africa. Postcolonial studies may use African-based categories of analysis, but the academies of the Global North retain the prerogative to define and apply these categories.

The marginalization of African contributions to global humanities and social sciences research is routinely justified by reference to a set of global “academic standards.” Although ostensibly universal, these standards tend to privilege contributions from the Global North and undervalue contributions from elsewhere. Differences in research orientation, with a more positivist approach dominating work from southern Africa, are not fully recognized or clearly contextualized by many peer reviewers based in the North. Consequently, researchers in the southern African region have to decide whether to accept and cultivate the dominant research culture of the North in order to get “thinking from the South” published in international journals; or whether to attempt to challenge that hegemony and establish parallel African journals and publishing houses outside the international high-IF rankings. Both of these approaches carry risks for the researchers who need to publish in order to secure their jobs and win promotions. Moreover, neither approach addresses the costs to global academia as a whole in the muting of these African perspectives.

At present, there is no discourse about what might be valuable in local ways of working: the focus of interventions from the North is on what is *wrong* with local ways of working and what help might be offered to put it right. Inevitably, then, the global inequalities of power will produce resistance, not quiescence, from academics in southern Africa. There was a sense amongst the academics I spoke with in Zimbabwe that the issue should not be “can we learn to play the game?” but “how can we change the relations of engagement?” Research managers were strongly in favor of capacity-building investment in training and workshops, which could familiarize faculty members with the techniques used to teach research skills to undergraduates in the Global North. But for many working academics, this could be only an interim sticking plaster approach. As Mohamed-Katerere

put it, “You rent a house, but you save your money to buy your own house.” At present, it seems the genuine desire by journals such as *JSAS* to address these global inequalities is too often expressed by offering to help with redecorating the rented house. We need to re-start the conversation at a different level.

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Notes

1. Moreover, there is a widespread expectation that Africans will research exclusively on African topics, a limitation not expected of researchers in the Global North.
2. All peer review comments are, of course, anonymized, and unreferenced here.
3. Only last year, Andrea Cornwall (pers. comm.), Head of the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex, reported that a paper she had written had been rejected because it did not cite the appropriate secondary literature. All of her citations were from experts based in the Global South.
4. The issues here are not solely economic. Mhoze Chikowero (2016:315) describes the reluctance to publish academic history in Zimbabwe unless it contributes to “the post-2000 historiographical battles for Zimbabwe [in which] both the state and massive oppositional forces (including vested publishing capital) commissioned...to advance competing ideological stances.”