Pluriversality or Contradictory Epistemes aboard a Scientific Research Vessel?

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Philosophical, historic, linguistic and socio-anthropological studies on contradiction(s) have conventionally focused on the evolution and implications of dissonance, paradox and contrariety (among others) in human thought and behavior. Yet, less emphasis is paid on exploring the definitional qualities of contradictions themselves, and how their prevalence is made sense of in everyday lifeworlds - be it in the context of religion, politics or scientific knowledge production for example. Scholarly work on contradictions have been diverse, often re-casting their social form and function through the lens of varied diverse topics of study ranging from paradoxical cognitive perceptions, incompatible values, and antithetical social practices to the “simultaneity of opposing forces” that pattern contemporary socio-economic and political life (Harvey, 2014:11). Yet the assumed Janus-faced dualism that forms a characteristic core in the study of contradictions and their diverse typologies (see Berliner, 2016) remains problematic when delineating diverse practices of knowledge production and their structures of meaning-making that are both foregrounded in and are generative of multiple realities or “many-worlds” embodied in the expansive notion of pluriversality (see Kohn, 2013; Viveros de Castro, 2016).

Tracing the use of the term from its formative roots in quantum mechanics and ‘pluritopic hermeneutics’ through to its decolonial quarrels with equally embattled notions such as multipolar knowledges and polycentrism, the chapter draws on the experiences of a female social scientist aboard a scientific research vessel taking samples from seabed, water column and air off the coast(s) of southwestern Africa. The research vessel is here considered as a boundary place of knowledge production, enabling and facilitating the crossing of disciplinary, national and gender specific lines of epistemic fragmentation and creating a border zone between field and laboratory research. Yet, while multiple epistemic boundaries are being crossed on board, the vessel at the same time dialogically acts as boundary-reinforcing zone between different disciplines and epistemic cultures, for as Walter Mignolo (2013:3) argues, “relevance is not universal, but depends on the universe of meaning and the belief system under which relevance is determined.” In line with this the chapter elaborates why the empirical study of ‘pluriversality’ as experienced on a German research vessel may offer added purchase to the study of knowledge making contradictions (or ideals in scientific non-contradiction). Moreover we ask whether the term itself offers to be taken as more than just a potent metaphoric device for thinking about – or of thinking through – the co-presence of multiple (epistemic) worlds and the structures at hand nurturing or hindering their interaction.

Keywords: Pluriversality; Disciplinary knowledges; Sense- and meaning-making; Boundary places; Border zones; Research Vessel

References


