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LENA MERKLE

Epistemological Anarchism Against Epistemic Violence? A Rereading of Paul Feyerabend towards the Decolonisation of Academic Knowledge Production

ABSTRACT *This paper aims at a rereading of Paul Feyerabend's later work through the lens of decolonial research and towards the aim of contributing to the debates around epistemic violence. Three of Feyerabend's ideas, namely epistemological anarchism, democratic relativism and the likeness of science and myth, are chosen as essential elements of Feyerabend's critical perspective of scientific hegemony. They are evaluated, against the backdrop of epistemic violence in scientific research, on the levels of the coloniality of knowledge production and concerning the entanglements of science and society and state. The paper concludes that Feyerabend's proposal towards concrete action is promising and could add to the project of decolonisation through a restructuring of academia in the global North.*

KEYWORDS *Feyerabend, epistemological anarchism, democratic relativism, coloniality of knowledge, epistemic violence*

1. Introduction

Paul Feyerabend was no decolonial philosopher. Yet, I argue that his writings are of interest to the topic. Not only does he speak to the debates of coloniality of knowledge and epistemic violence from within academia, but he also proposes consequences to that criticism. I argue that he is a valuable accomplice with decolonial scholarship-activism in his attempt to dismantle academia from within and through his propositions on finding a new understanding of knowledge that values diversity. This does not, however, make him a decolonial scholar, and any attempt to do so would

fall short of decolonial aspirations and standards, and he has yet to become present in the literature on epistemic violence. He is not entirely absent, but references are few, albeit clear in detailing how his criticism speaks to them (Grasswick 2017: 321; Mungwini 2017: 15). The most likely explanation for his absence seems to be the controversial image he has in most scientific communities. Despite his success and academic network, or potentially due to its political situatedness, Feyerabend was already considered in his lifetime a provocative and polarising thinker (Preston 1997: 19f.). This perspective seems to have become consensual, leaving him less featured in contemporary debates than one might expect (Stadler 2014: 47). Yet, his work goes beyond simple provocation into an unafraid, complex and far-reaching criticism of academia and its sacrosanct appearance – all issues that are of relevance when it comes to un/doing epistemic violence.

The terminology concerning epistemic violence is far from clear, with various terms being used in similar ways. Hence, I would like to give an account of how epistemic violence will be defined, but also distinguished from other terms, for the course of this paper. To start with, Miranda Fricker famously defined epistemic injustice as “a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower” (2007: 1), emphasising what makes the injustice epistemic. While there are different ways of wronging a knower, they all lead up to the knower being perceived as not having an equal standing on an epistemic level with those wronging them. The wrong is rooted in marginalisation (Nikolaidis 2021: 383), as opposed to epistemic mistakes with no discriminatory intention (Byskov 2021: 120). And while many forms of marginalisation lead to epistemic injustice, this paper’s focus lies on marginalisation in relation to coloniality.

When experiences of epistemic injustice happen systematically, following Rachel McKinnon, we can speak of epistemic violence (2016: 442). A.C. Nikolaidis then relates epistemic violence to Iris Young’s five faces of oppression, showing how applicable they are to the topic (Nikolaidis 2021: 386). Hence, epistemic violence is here understood as a structural form of epistemic injustice that is a form of epistemic oppression.

This understanding is particularly relevant to decolonial takes on epistemic violence, as it highlights the wilfulness of epistemic violence in the context of coloniality. Here, epistemic violence describes the ongoing violent process of limited access to, partaking in, and distribution of,

knowledge: who can produce relevant knowledge and by what means, and what is considered relevant knowledge in the first place? Following Gayatri Spivak, I understand epistemic violence as a process deeply rooted in the structures of coloniality shaping our perception of the world, and as creating a colonial subject which claims universal knowledge and power, and silences the subaltern Other (1988). The paradigm of rationality was created through enlightenment and has dominated colonial understandings of knowledge throughout modernity. It leaves us with a limited and exclusive understanding of knowledge that privileges Eurocentric, supposedly objective scientific knowledge over other knowledges, which are either completely erased from knowing or treated as inferior (Santos 2014: 118f.).¹ To solidify this assumptions, non-academic and non-Western knowledge is categorised as alternative or spiritual (Mignolo 2019: 235f.), hence making it unfit for any discourse on equal terms with academic knowledge. To be unrecognised as a knower is an act of silencing and exclusion. The epistemic violence perpetrated also robs people of the categories by which they understand themselves and the world (Bhargava 2013: 414). It thereby erases self-certainty and self-confidence, which then leads people towards Eurocentric knowledge as the only option left (Heleta 2016: 4).

This exclusivity is obvious in the academic canon, which not only privileges certain scholars, but punishes those who do not adhere to a Eurocentric style of knowledge production (Bhambra et al. 2018: 4ff.). In this paper, I will thus focus on epistemic violence in the context of academia, though this is not meant to be a limit of where epistemic violence can be found, as it cannot be isolated from other types of violence, but also societal and colonial structures and histories of epistemic violence beyond academia (Brunner 2020: 128). The article thus focuses on one part of a larger systematic practice of epistemic violence with the aim of contributing to the ongoing process of decolonisation. To this aim, I propose a rereading of Feyerabend's work that includes both a critique of scientific method and the hegemony of academia and a proposal to change both.

After briefly introducing Feyerabend, I will give some insight into his writings by highlighting three aspects that might interest the discourse around epistemic violence. These are (a) his takes on myths and academia; (b) the idea of democratic relativism; and (c) his proposal of epistemological anarchism, in order to debate their relevance for the decolonial

discourse and hint at how the above-mentioned concepts can be of interest to decolonial endeavours against epistemic violence by adding a perspective of allyship from within academia.

2. Paul Feyerabend

The Austrian philosopher Feyerabend studied physics (Feyerabend 1995a: 64) before turning to the philosophy of science. During his studies in Vienna, he was part of the Third Vienna Circle and became well-connected with many European philosophers (Stadler 2014: 48ff.). He planned to write his doctoral thesis under Ludwig Wittgenstein's supervision, but, after Wittgenstein's death, went to study with Karl Popper instead (Feyerabend 1995a: 86). Both philosophers were central to his formation, as were Ernst Mach and Thomas Kuhn, though his later career was shaped by strongly differentiating himself from their influence before finding again some common ground with Kuhn and Mach (Stadler 2014: 60ff.). After a few years in Bristol, he went on to Berkeley, where he spent most of his career, though with interruptions and guest positions in various countries (Feyerabend 1995a). The experience in Berkeley, particularly the increasingly diverse student community from the 1960s onwards, led to an interesting development in his work. Already critical of research processes, he became more aware of the limited relevance of academic knowledge and of its exclusionary practices and privileged position (Feyerabend 1982: 118f.).

Though not at the centre of the canon, Feyerabend's works are discussed and elaborated on in various contexts, ranging from philosophy to educational science (Niaz 2020). Saul Newman included him in the elaboration of his own concept of postanarchism (Newman 2011: 317f), even though Feyerabend was decidedly not a supporter of political anarchism. But he is connected to the topic through his choice to call his approach an anarchist one and his criticism that even anarchist thinkers, who were quick to dismantle any other power structure, struggled to see the hegemonies of academia (Feyerabend 1975: 32ff, 252). He is therefore an interesting fit for Newman explaining his "critique of the absolutism of scientific knowledge" (Newman 2011: 317). Newman's solution is to bring anarchist thought away from its foundational principles; thereby, it is opened up to criticism and

interpretation. With Michel Foucault, Newman proposes an anti-science that doesn't primarily focus on truth claims and is aware of the hierarchisation of knowledge. This works well with Feyerabend's critique that academia is guided more by a striving for power than by standards of credibility and ethical research (Newman 2019: 84f.).

I argue that Feyerabend's later work in particular, on which I will focus in the following, is as relevant to a decolonial critique of academia as to a (post)anarchist one. Anarchism necessarily has to be anticolonial, as it rejects hegemonic structures. And though postcolonial anarchism is another field with much room for further engagement, it is not elaborated on further, due to this paper's limited scope (Ramnath 2011; White 2005).

2.1 Myth and academia

Much of Feyerabend's writings revolve around the issue of how to make truth claims. Having detached from Popper's falsifiability, Feyerabend also left behind the idea of objective empirical truths in general (1995b: 168ff.). Instead, he understands perceptions and experiences as based on ideological contexts of socialisation (1975: 393).

The central criticism that Feyerabend brings against academia is its status in society. He criticises the blind belief in researchers and the unfounded claim of the exceptionality of their findings. Feyerabend interpreted this constructivist perspective as having fundamental implications for the legitimacy of academic research. In a constructed world, world-making is based on equally valid belief-systems and research can only discover relative answers (1975: 22f.). Not only does this anchor his critique as to what research can and cannot do, but it also led to the above-mentioned rejection of an absolute truth (1975: 261). It also made Feyerabend take issue with the discursive dominance of academia and the superiority claims it tends to make, while often based on unfounded assertions and improper aims (1975: 78f.). He supports his stance by detailing how often research does not follow a proper method. He mentions the research process in which several mutually exclusive theories exist simultaneously; thus, not all of them can be correct (1975: 355, 371). Finally, he criticises the academic industry as a profitable structure that strives for recognition, power, and comfort more than for knowledge and advancement (1975: 271f.).

This leads him to the conclusion that academia and myths have much in common. He explains that both are constructs trying to find heterogeneous systems of explaining the world. They include a ritualised way of behaviour, taboos and doctrines that can hardly be questioned. If we now understand the claim of producing real knowledge, as opposed to other types of myths, religions, worldviews etc., to be in fact an ideological claim, then Feyerabend's conclusion is fitting (1975: 394ff.). This take might seem anachronistic in these times of backlash against researchers, post-truth politics, and religious fundamentalism. Caution is needed in order not to provide more material for the anti-scientific 'Western' movements. At the same time, it is crucial not to dismiss his argument just because it might be abused.

Feyerabend is by no means against research. He does not want to abolish research, but rather the unaccountability and elitism of modern academia. He wants to lift other traditions up, but only tear down academic research as far as it has entered the realm of hubris and blind ideology (Feyerabend 1975: 24). Here, Feyerabend's criticism is close to decolonial discourses. When speaking about the colonality of knowledge, modern academia is criticised as being based on a "totalizing myth of reason and universality" (Vázquez 2011: 35) that is shaped into an "ideological apparatus" (Castro-Gómez 2019: 220).

The criticism decolonial theories raise is twofold: on the one hand, there is criticism towards modern academia's underlying paradigms. For example, the Eurocentric idea of rationality is considered as just one amongst many concepts by decolonial scholars, allowing instead for ambiguity and fluidity (Bhargava 2013: 415). This only becomes problematic, however, through academia's totalitarian and universal claim to be the only source of knowledge, while treating any other type of knowledge as a belief, which is an inherently violent undertaking. At the same time, the ability to be rational and reasonable is framed as a specific trait of the global North (Ideland 2018: 785ff.). This is not only very colonial by nature, but also exceeds the accomplishments that academia could deservedly claim. As Santos phrases it: "A characteristic feature of our time is [...] that modern science belongs to the realm of both ideas and beliefs. Belief in science greatly exceeds anything scientific ideas enable us to accomplish" (2014: 192). This shows how Feyerabend focuses more on the mistakes and

false claims that researchers make, whereas decolonial criticism is stronger regarding the colonising nature of modern science and its limited applicability to experiences outside of the global North.

On the other hand, decolonial criticism stresses the socio-political implications of scientific claims and their complicity and legitimising role in the politics of coloniality, including the erasure of diversity, the classification and ordering of colonial subjects, and the devaluation of othered experiences (Vázquez 2011: 34f.). This support of one political system then led to the support of scientific hegemony, making it apparent how dominance is built not on inherent success but on oppression (Ndofirepi/Gwaravanda 2019:590). This combination of coloniality of power and coloniality of knowledge seems to be lost on Feyerabend. He does address the oppression of other knowledges through the universal claims of academia but makes no explicit references to the political dimension. His awareness of these can at best be assumed by how he proposes a political change as a necessary basis for a shift in science and the diversification of knowledges through his idea of democratic relativism.

Nevertheless, it has become apparent that Feyerabend shares a fundamental criticism of academia with that of the decolonial debate. Both speak to each other and add to the same issue from different perspectives of their situatedness within the coloniality of the world and within academia.

2.2 Democratic relativism

Feyerabend proposes that the dominance of academia in society threatens democracy. He suggests that, in a democratic society, citizens must be able to judge their institutions. When researchers establish themselves as a higher authority regarding knowledge, it is difficult to judge them; they could always say that society simply doesn't understand. Hence, academia is an unchecked institution due to intellectual elitism, which Feyerabend opposes with democratic relativism (1999: 218). The main idea of this concept is that everyone judges the world by standards of their belief systems, Feyerabend calls them traditions, which can be anything from religion to politics and occupation. Yet, one can only judge a context from the perspective of one's own tradition(s). This, however, does not imply that one cannot judge other traditions, and Feyerabend suggests that science should be judged by everyone affected by it (1999: 220f.).

Hence, judgment is not dominance. Feyerabend aims to reduce the academic tradition's dominance over other traditions through a separation of academia and state (1975: 385ff.), thus reducing the unchecked and direct influence of academia on politics. In his opinion, all traditions should be able to exist without interference and without being pressured into compliance. Instead, people should be able to experience different traditions to compare and choose the ones most convincing to them. The unfounded dominance of science prevents such a coexistence of traditions (1999: 224).

Of particular relevance is this perspective in politics, where, for a holistic understanding, different knowledges must be considered. This is especially true since science is informed by specific values which legitimise exploitative or appropriating actions in the name of progress (Castro-Gómez 2019; Lander 2019).

For issues that impact society as a whole, he proposes a democratic negotiation process, where representatives or councils of the involved traditions come together to find solutions (1999: 224). To ensure the ability of people to be part of such processes, Feyerabend raises the issue of education and argues against a solely science-based education. Children growing up with awareness of various knowledges might be capable of more epistemologically complex discussions (Medina 2018: 251). To this end, children should be exposed to many different ways of perceiving the world (Feyerabend 1975: 291f.). At the same time, giving children access to their cultures of origin and associated knowledges is important (Bajaj 2022). Thus, curricula could be influenced by communal knowledges but should also emphasise education that focusses on understanding different perspectives, weighing options and finding one's own way, as many anarchist approaches suggest (Suissa 2004: 75ff.).

Here, too, the connections between Feyerabend's and decolonial ideas become clear. He talks about traditions whereas Boaventura de Sousa Santos uses the terms of knowledge's plurality (2014: 137) and epistemological diversity (2014: 192) to describe very similar phenomena. Additionally, Santos not only identifies local knowledges, but also knowledges along the lines of belonging, identification, and intersectionality (2014: 42). In general, the decolonial debate seems more focused on the big picture, whereas Feyerabend looks at how traditions can be both protected and restricted. This could be an interesting point with which to complement decolonial theory.

Though Feyerabend doesn't frame his criticism of academic hegemony as a critique of coloniality, it is open to such interpretation. While it is important not to give too much praise to Feyerabend, who spoke of the racial and the colonial dimension of research and academia but didn't make it his focus, he writes in such an inclusive fashion of marginalised knowledges and exclusion from academia that a connection can be made. His concept of a democratic process for different traditions' interaction is, again, not foreign to decolonial texts. Santos speaks of criteria for diversity of knowledge that must be politically negotiated through "radical and intercultural democratic processes" (2014: 175) and stresses the room democracy has for diversity and difference (2014: 181) while Walter Mignolo mentions the "democratic imaginaries" (2000: 24) that can arise through social movements in the decolonial project.

Admittedly, both are also critical of democracy, underscoring how it is one of the liberal faces of the global North's hegemonic endeavours (Santos 2014: 182) and that local appropriation is necessary to make democracy a viable concept for decolonial imaginaries (Mignolo 2000: 319). This nuance is not to be found in Feyerabend's writings. Yet, his understanding of democracy as portrayed in his works is one quite different from current political systems, and has, in its claims to autonomy of traditions and ideas similar to council structures, interesting notions of anarchist organisation that might be compatible with the mentioned decolonial notions, which remain rather vague in their understanding of democracy.

2.3. 'Anything goes' and epistemological anarchism

Feyerabend particularly criticises research methods. In his writings, he dismisses a strict epistemology that prescribes research definitive rules or universal methods. He again sets himself apart from the influences in his early career by making it clear how little he considers universal methodological rules to be substantial (1995b: 168ff.). He also says that research does not follow the high standards of epistemological theory. Instead, it relies far more on guesswork, chance, and concealed insecurities than researchers would care to admit. Hence, the existing methods cannot be sufficiently convincing (1975: 249). And, finally, he argues that when trying to find something truly new it is necessary to go beyond the tested ways. Rules are constricting, in that they keep researchers from making

discoveries, because they were developed for contexts which were already known (1975: 35, 232, 247ff.). He gives historical examples, concluding that ground-breaking research has often happened due to a disregard of established methodology and that following a rigid methodology was only ever a narrative told by researchers. (1975: 21ff.). This translates well into decolonial thought, which is about centring ways of knowing that cannot be grasped by research methodologies.

Feyerabend concludes that, methodologically, ‘anything goes’. A theory will be full of unclarities when it is first thought up, and remains so until it has been thought through or until convincing empirical explanations have been found. It is usually unclear whether a new theory will be dismissed or evolve into an established theory. When we initially restrict our own thinking, we might not include promising perspectives or might even never come to think of them. (1975: 42ff.).

The principle behind ‘anything goes’, which Feyerabend terms epistemological anarchism, is not a methodology, but rather a plea for an open approach to research and for pluralism, leaving room to follow different paths without concern for their success. He emphasises the relevance of comparison in order to grasp new ideas and advocates for understanding that nothing is complete, as every methodology is limited (1975: 48ff.).

An anarchist approach to epistemology is promising, in that it is also inherently critical regarding the academic power structures (Newman 2011: 317). Decolonial thought doesn’t typically concern itself with Western academia, but focuses instead on amplifying and empowering knowledges that have been marginalised and with developing new epistemologies. It is central to delink those attempts from science (Mignolo 2009: 160). The hegemonic nature of academia doesn’t allow for the existence of genuinely different knowledges. Hence, any try at reinforcing them must necessarily happen outside of academia.

Though there has been some awareness of indigenous knowledges across disciplines, this tends to be a minority position and also face significant scrutiny as regards their potential for orientalist romanticisation and knowledge extractivism (Mignolo 2000: 45; Santos 2014: 123). Feyerabend gives examples of indigenous knowledges and how they have been treated by researchers in his writings (Feyerabend 1975: 78f.), but makes no explicit note as to how they should be included in academia in a non-extractivist

way. The likely reason here is that, while he was aware of their marginalised position, he would have been unaware of the issue of extractivism and appropriation.

Yet, both Feyerabend and many decolonial writers agree that academic research is limiting and exclusionary (Santos 2014: 15,19). While Feyerabend states that this is limiting progress, Mignolo points out how it particularly limits people and knowledges from the global South (Mignolo 2000: 17). Santos and Feyerabend agree that it is exclusionary and leads to academia having little of relevance to say and ends up only speaking to itself (Santos 2014: 145). Santos also stresses that truth only exists in relation to circumstances and methods (2014: 119), which ties in well with Feyerabend's notion of the impossibility of universal methods and truths. Both authors also share a deep appreciation for non-academic knowledges and everyday experiences (Santos 2014: 120). And, finally, Santos addresses the matter of theory and methods in modern research while stating that it is based on overly developed methods while lacking theory (2014: 147). Here, Feyerabend's criticism of the lack of flexibility to work in new circumstances could be a valuable addition. They both agree on the limited abilities of theory, with Santos stressing its limited development, and Feyerabend theoretical inconsistencies.

This, of course, does not answer the question of whether academia is salvageable at all. Much decolonial writing takes place at the border of academic work, much of its activism being outside of academia. Even further, delinking of decolonial thought and knowledges from Eurocentric academia is vital to ensuring its unhindered work (Mignolo 2007: 453). However, if we are not to completely abolish academia in the first place, a change of paradigms as proposed by Feyerabend is also necessary in order to establish a version of academia that is more diverse in knowledges, self-critical, and aware of its own history. This would most likely also include the abolition of disciplinary boundaries (Connell 2021: 349) and the introduction of more diverse teaching curricula and styles (Alcoff 2017: 400), including local knowledges (Heleta 2016: 5) and various histories (Pitts 2017: 153), methodologies, epistemologies (Connell 2021: 350), as well as ethics (Mungwini 2017: 15). It also necessitates the recentring of academia in the context of its own geographical origin and to no longer understand it as being universal. Instead, such a process of localisation allows for other

local centres. After all, “if science were just one among many equally influential ways of knowing [...], the epistemic injustices perpetrated through them would be far less serious” (Grasswick 2017: 321).

3. Concluding remarks

In this paper I reread Feyerabend’s later works through the lens of epistemic violence, with the aim of adding to the debate around the decolonisation of knowledge. I tackled three of his main arguments, detailing his awareness of the hegemonic nature of academia. Therefore, his criticism speaks to decolonial communities, and his absence from their debates is a missed opportunity.

His ideas often remain vague, as they are in the difficult position of attempting to concretise an idea that is not supposed to tell people what to do, analogous to the struggles of anarchist writers. I further argued that his ideas of democratic relativism and epistemological anarchism are relevant approaches for the goal of changing academia, due to their different position. Researchers from the Global North need to surrender the lead in the decolonial project to those far more capable of it. This is not to say that they should all just passively watch; but they need to give up the claim to making the decisions and driving the project forward on their own terms. Instead, they should learn from marginalised scholars, if these are willing to teach, (Mignolo 2009: 172) and follow their guidance in both research and activism.

Feyerabend represents the privilege of a researcher from the Global North. His self-assurance of participating in academic debates as a student, his professional network, and the job opportunities he had despite his provocative work, underline this. Therefore, and due to the many blind spots in his work when it comes to the sheer dimensions of coloniality, his work is not suitable to teach anyone about decolonisation. Yet, leaving decolonial and marginalised scholars to centre their own knowledges and epistemologies is just one side of the coin; the other is to decentre academia from within. It is the responsibility of researchers from the Global North to check their own institutions and give up the space they occupy without justification. The opening of academic debates towards new knowledges,

be it as part of their own canon or as equal partners outside of the academic institutional setting, requires change in how researchers think and act. Decolonial researchers from the Global North must consider themselves as allies (Santos 2014: 9,14,16). This requires epistemological changes and the act of stepping aside. It means actively working towards universities which are less exclusive and easier to navigate for a more diverse set of researchers, and to share spaces with those not working in academia. This is where Feyerabend's contributions are the most relevant.

Furthermore, Feyerabend's writings share many similarities with approaches to epistemic violence. Although he did not explicitly address epistemic violence, his critique of academia as an exclusive and overpowering system is in line with decolonial writings on epistemic violence. Both address the issue of how knowers of one knowledge are lifted up, whereas other knowers are not considered knowers in the first place and not taken seriously when speaking from the perspective of their knowledge. He adds to the debate a dimension on awareness of how the uplifted Eurocentric knowledge is deeply flawed, hence making its universalistic claims invalid in yet another way. His suggestions are valuable in how they help to decentre knowledges and open room for non-violent epistemological exchange and diverse and open research.

Regarding the question of how Feyerabend's ideas could be translated into research practice, the scope of this paper allowed for mere hints. Further development of those ideas is necessary and will be rewarding for academia, as well as beyond. Additionally, this paper made several references to similarities between Feyerabend's thought and anarchism, as well as towards anarchism and decolonial thought. These avenues also deserve further research and elaboration.

- 1 At the time of writing of this paper the recent criticism of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' behaviour towards women who were dependent on him had not yet been published (Viaene et al. (2023); Matamala (2023)). Unfortunately, the time frame of publication of this paper did not allow for a rewriting after the allegations became known, and thus Santos remains a central reference throughout. I deeply regret this, and am in solidarity with Santos' victims as well as with all victims of abuse and oppression within academia and beyond.

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ABSTRACT Der Beitrag versucht eine Relektüre von Paul Feyerabends späteren Werken aus dekolonialer Perspektive und mit dem Ziel, zu den Debatten um epistemische Gewalt beizutragen. Drei Ideen Feyerabends – sein epistemologischer Anarchismus, sein demokratischer Relativismus sowie die Gleichheit von Wissenschaft und Mythos – werden als zentrale Elemente von Feyerabends kritischer Perspektive auf Wissenschaftshegemonie betrachtet. Sie werden vor dem Hintergrund epistemischer Gewalt in der Wissenschaft und hinsichtlich der Verstrickungen von Wissenschaft mit Staat und Gesellschaft diskutiert. Der Beitrag kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass Feyerabends konkrete Handlungsvorschläge vielversprechend sind und über eine Neustrukturierung der Wissenschaften des Globalen Nordens zum Projekt der Dekolonialisierung beitragen können.

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