# The democratization and decolonization of academic knowledge in a pandemic and post-pandemic world[*]

It was March of 2020, and I was just starting a new postdoctoral position at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. I was excited and motivated, my mind bubbling with ideas about conferences, workshops and classes I was going to teach. I was of course aware of the coronavirus and its devastating effects in Europe, but in the beginning of March the city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil was detecting its very first cases, and the situation seemed distant enough to allow me to plan a somewhat normal semester. All doors were open and the sky was the limit, or so I thought.

Immediately after my initial bursts of excitement in the beginning of March, everything moved very rapidly. By mid-March the pandemic was advancing rapidly all over the country, the university suspended all its (in-person) activities, and most of the city was shutting down under quarantine. I spent the following weeks trying to understand the situation and what it all meant, not only for my personal and professional plans, but for the future of the university, the city, the country, and the planet as a whole. But, like most people in Brazil at the time, I didn't have a clue about whether we would soon resume our normal lives, or whether we should prepare ourselves for deep, fundamental changes in nearly every aspect of human existence. The latter option turned out to be true.

Faced with grim and uncertain prospects, I started to ponder about how I, as an academic philosopher, could contribute to the global crisis that would follow. Shortly after I saw a call for essays on the following topic: "how the world will/should change? The corona crisis as an interdisciplinary challenge." Well, I thought, this is it! Here's my contribution as an academic philosopher: to provide an in-depth analysis of how the world will, or should change, due to the global crisis caused by the new coronavirus. So far, so good. Except that the question was still too generic to provide an answer to my yearnings. A first problem is that "the world" seemed too big to make the question tractable, as it refers to the totality of things and relations that exist at multiple levels of analysis, from the social to the economical, from the political to the ecological. The second problem is that "will change" and "should change" seemed to point to two different questions, which demand different answers and different methods for arriving at these answers. So what part of the world am I talking about, and which aspect of "change" do I want to focus on?

Regarding the first problem, I will talk about the part of the world that about happens to be my domain of action and expertise: academic philosophy. Although academic philosophy is but a tiny portion of the world, these changes have the potential to positively affect thousands across the globe, specially the most affected departments in third-world countries. As to the second problem, we should understand the "will/should" question not as disjunction of possibilities, but as an exercise in "grounded imagination": to imagine the world we would like to inhabit, in a way that is fully grounded in how it is actually changing right now. In this picture, the question can be rephrased as: "what kind of change do we want to see in the world, and what aspects of how the world is actually changing point us in that direction?" I will refer to these changes as "the democratization and decolonization of academic philosophy." Let me explain.

I completed my graduate studies in Europe. As I returned to Brazil for my postdoctoral fellowship, the difference in the production, circulation, and access to academic knowledge was striking. This, of course, is the result of good European funding agencies (and a history of colonization), which allow researchers to produce and circulate knowledge in a fast and effective manner. Brazil, in contrast, suffers from severe budget cuts in higher education and in the humanities especially, a problem that has gotten much worse in recent years during the right-wing administration of Bolsonaro.

It is true that with a simple internet account we can have full access to international journals; but by the time these ideas are published a significant amount of time will have elapsed since they were first circulating in Europe. In addition, academic knowledge usually flows in one way only, as we in the third-world try to absorb, with a time lag, all that happens in the first world. As things stand, therefore, academic knowledge is undemocratic and colonialist: some have better access than others, and knowledge flows in one direction only.

With recent measures of social isolation, however, something curious started to happen. The same series of colloquiums I used to attend in Europe were all moving online, and they are now open to everyone with a decent internet access no matter where in the world one happens to be. This is a huge step towards the democratization of academic knowledge, since researchers in the third world are now allowed not only to follow the debates as they occur, but to actively engage with them.

But I believe we can be more radical than that. In the current model I've just described, knowledge continues to flow in one direction only, where it is the role of Europeans to teach third-worlders who are lagging in their philosophical knowledge. But if we are to reach a fully democratic and decolonized academic world, knowledge needs to flow both ways, and first-world academic philosophers need to be moved and shaped by third-world philosophers just as much as we in the third-world are influenced by what goes on over there.

What we need, in other words, are serious online collaborations and partnerships between philosophy departments worldwide. Research and study groups could be formed, ideas and projects collectively built, and academic knowledge could arise as the product of genuine multicultural collaboration, in a horizontal and decolonized structure. As these collaborations would take place in virtual environments, the preconditions for the democratization and decolonization of academic knowledge are already in place.

To be clear, despite my positive outlook I am not saying that the global crisis caused by the new coronavirus is a "marvelous opportunity", as it is often put out there. I believe we should always refer to the pandemic by what it is: a biological catastrophe, with far-reaching consequences for nearly every aspect of human existence on this planet. In highlighting the importance of democratization and decolonization of academic philosophical knowledge, I am also not overlooking the fact that many philosophy departments across the globe will suffer immensely from the economic recession that will follow. So it is clear that not everything will be roses in the post-pandemic years to come.

The democratization and decolonization of academic knowledge is sensitive to these questions, and may even contribute to alleviating them. For in this new proposal much of knowledge flows virtually, which means it is also less costly, allowing the most affected departments to remain productive with a smaller budget due to international online collaborations. In addition, project funding from agencies in wealthier nations could be redistributed and shared with the more heavily affected departments, through joint projects made possible by continuous online collaborations. We just need to ensure that researchers actively seek these contributions, and that institutions support and encourage them, specially the first world ones.

This, in short, is my personal contribution, as an academic philosopher, to the global crisis brought by the new coronavirus. First, I argued that the question "how the world will/should change?" should be rephrased as "what kind of change do we want to see in the world, and what aspects of how the world is actually changing point us in that direction?" My suggestion is that the way academic knowledge is produced and accessed could benefit from a radical restructuring, towards greater democratization and decolonization. As things are now rapidly moving online due to social isolation measures, this provides the ideal virtual environment for genuine - and cheap - collaborations between departments in different countries. We will need this sort of international solidarity and collaboration in the pandemic and post-pandemic world, since we can only recover from the blow dealt by the new coronavirus if we work together. If this proposal is taken seriously, we can start working together virtually to foster academic philosophy - or any other discipline for that matter - worldwide, even in the most affected departments.

Of course, I am admittedly vague on the precise details of how the full change might take place, since the purpose of this essay is just to spark a desire for change. Undoubtedly problems will arise once we start implementing these measures, and we should be ready to deal with them as they come. But a good place to start, for example, would be to jointly organize international online workshops, which are relatively easy and cheap to put together in the current scenario. International online research and study groups are also good options. As collaborations grow stronger, we can gradually move to bigger things like joint online projects submitted to international funding agencies, international online classes, and so on. We need to start small, and these initial changes are already possible in the current state of the academic world.

In any case, the fact that the fully democratic and decolonized scenario still seems far away should not discourage us. If each academic philosopher who reads this essay builds at least one (virtual) bridge with a foreign department, we will already have taken a huge step in that direction, and will be there before we know it.