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Ideas in Exchange: Reflections on a Project of Transcontinental Learning

IDEAS Collective[1]
Universities of Bamako (Mali), Basel (Switzerland), Bayreuth (Germany) [2] and Conakry (Guinea)

ABSTRACT

What are the meanings and aims of social sciences in a global social environment marked by ever-growing processes of exchange, connection, inequality and conflict? How do we contend with the social sciences as the science of modernization? How do we account for the Western-centered biases ingrained in their proclamations? And in what ways are the social sciences useful to scholars and professionals in different societies? These questions figure at the heart of IDEAS (International Digital Exchange between Africa and Switzerland), a project[3] that aimed to examine them across continents and generations.

Bringing together Masters students and faculty from Guinea, Mali and Switzerland over three years, it explored how disciplines like sociology and anthropology are defined and interpreted in different contexts, how scientific work is conducted across continents, and which methodological, theoretical and social concerns emerge from the experience of such a transcontinental learning project. The central activities had been two joint workshops held in Bamako (2019) and Tunis (2021), two online seminars on theoretical and methodological issues around social sciences research in and on Africa, and a group session at the Swiss Researching Africa Days (SRAD 2020). During this whole period, which coincided with the Coronavirus pandemic, students and teachers remained connected through an online learning platform and other digital technologies. This article reflects on IDEAS as a social and academic experiment by relating theoretical and practice-oriented perspectives on knowledge production between the Global South and the Global North. Based on notes, recordings, and written reflections by the participants as well as an external evaluation, the aim of this article is not to harmonize the broad range of positions, but rather to tease out the complexities of the issues at stake, including the increasing social and epistemological diversity in transcontinental social science scholarship. While the article offers more open questions than findings, the authors highlight the social embeddedness of transcontinental academic learning. As they show, the failures and successes of the IDEAS project in attaining its academic goals depended to a considerable degree on human relationships.

Keywords: International learning, digital spaces, Africa, Europe, knowledge production

INTRODUCTION

Asymmetries in the production and circulation of knowledge have persistent and pernicious implications. The sheer dominance of European and American scholarly production skews the ways in which the social world is known and studied across the globe (Macamo, 2016). African university curricula and publications are replete with references to Western scholarship and "expertise" (Nyamnjoh, 2019), and African decision-makers still call on Western researchers to enlighten them on the challenges facing the continent. Built into the institution of the modern university, the dominance of "Northern theory" (Connell, 2006) thus coexists with increasing critiques against it (e.g., Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Tamale, 2020). To make matters more complex, the distinctions

and binaries underlying such observations, between global "north" and "south", or between knowledges from "Euro-America" and "Africa", often bely the hybridization of knowledges that characterize social reality in the so-called global south. In Guinea and Mali, for instance, indigenous and Islamic knowledges have been interwoven over generations. New emic forms of knowledge have emerged and allowed for the cohabitation of the fetish and the one God. Hybridization has been a driving force in this historical encounter (Bâ, 2004; Diagne, 2010, 2016). Paradoxically, the same can be said about the social reality of contemporary university life, where the boundaries between knowledge systems are routinely blurred, transgressed, and repositioned. In the universities of Conakry or Bamako, and we shall insist: also at a university like that of Basel, students and faculty interact through multiple registers, with their respective hegemonic, subversive, or emancipatory qualities being renegotiated in each social situation (Simone, 2008).

This complex relationship between everyday practices of navigating different knowledge systems and the critique of colonial power disparities of knowledge production constituted the double backdrop to the IDEAS project. When Dr. Noemi Steuer (Basel) and Dr. Bréma Ely Dicko (Bamako) started thinking about the project together in 2017, the idea was to create a space that would enable open and ongoing conversations between continents (Africa and Europe) and across generations (students and professors), assuming that such a dialogue would yield insights into the relation between theoretical and practical knowledge. At the same time, available digital tools made it possible to conceive of a platform for continuous intercultural exchanges across geographical distances.

Through this article, we seek to reflect on the unfolding of IDEAS as a collective, with its successes and shortcomings. We take note of its idiosyncrasies, as well as the tragedies and obstacles that marked its path. We also proceed this way to address specific preoccupations about the social sciences. Inspired by the late Noemi Steuer's initial inquiries, the IDEAS collective sought to examine the meanings and relevance of the social sciences in different societies not simply in theoretical terms, but also from a practice-oriented perspective. The resulting document synthesizes notes and recordings taken by students and lecturers during the project, reflections by participants from three countries (Guinea, Mali and Switzerland), as well as the results of the external evaluation conducted by Tina Melissa Tra who surveyed participants and took part in various events. We thus use our collective activities of learning and training in the course of the implementation of IDEAS as analytical unit and methodological lens, or more precisely as prism, to probe the meanings and uses of social sciences in different geographical professional contexts. In the explorative spirit of the initiative, the aim is not to harmonize the broad range of positions, but rather to tease out the complexities of the issues to enable us to cope with increasing social and epistemological diversity in transcontinental social science scholarship; again, not just as a matter of theory, but also as a way to practice.

The first part of this article, "Activities and Methods," outlines the project on the basis of what students and faculty from Bamako, Conakry and Basel listed and described as key experiences. Core concerns permeating this section are the questions of social distinction and cohesion, and the difficulties of becoming a collective across geographical distance, as

well as linguistic and socio-cultural boundaries.[4] The second part is a metareflection on the social sciences and their purposes, taking into account the different challenges that societies and social scientists alike are confronted with in contexts like Mali and Guinea. The conclusion finally ties the two parts together.

ACTIVITIES AND METHODS

Learning across borders

The first project workshop in Bamako took place on 2-6 September 2019. It focused on methodological and epistemological questions in the social sciences, with key readings on sociological classics such as "Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community" (Jahoda et al., 2002) and reflections on the cumulative potential (*cumulativité*) of knowledge in the social sciences (Pumain, 2005). Most readings had been proposed by Elísio Macamo, a Mozambican professor of sociology at the University of Basel, Switzerland. Of course, all lecturers from the three universities had been invited to suggest texts. The fact that Macamo was setting the scholarly tone came surprisingly natural, however, perhaps because he enjoyed the double legitimacy of representing the Global South and the Global North at once.

Lectures and discussions during the workshop were led by professors of the three universities. The participants were also introduced to collaboration-enabling digital tools, Google Drive and its respective services in particular, and grouped within six international working groups, each consisting of at least one student from Guinea, Mali, and Switzerland. As the workshop signaled the launch of IDEAS, people got acquainted not only with one another for the first time, but also with the underlying concerns of the project (co-production of knowledge, critique and validity of scientific discourses), with Bamako as a city, and more generally with different ways and manners of academic conversations. The discrepancies were substantial. Some students were introduced to inductive methods for the first time, having previously been asked to follow hypothesis-driven deductive methods as stipulated by the CAMES.[5] Some liked the focus on classic social science methodology and epistemology, while others found the workshop insufficiently aligned with a decidedly postcolonial perspective.

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[4] The project activities were mainly conducted in French, though the Basel-based students were mostly Germano- or Anglophone. While most of them spoke basic French, and though translation software such as DeepL could solve some of the difficulties of translation when working on texts, the social contact and the oral discussions were rendered difficult by these linguistic barriers.

[5] The African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES) regulates academic teaching and learning in most of Francophone sub-Saharan universities.

On a more general level, students from the University of Basel later voiced their disappointment that they did not get the feeling of having "exchanged" anything substantial with their Malian and Guinean counterparts while in Bamako. Indeed, there was sense of social hesitancy, not least based on linguistic and cultural differences, especially between the Francophone West African students and the Germanophone and Anglophone students from Switzerland. Different conceptions of privacy and collectivity, of gender roles and academic-political convictions were at play. In one incident, for example, a student from the University of Basel fell ill one night. The next day, students from Bamako and Conakry wanted to check on her, and the students from Basel explained to them that the student preferred to stay alone to rest and recover. This explanation did not resonate well with the courtesy and care principles of Guineans and Malians, who felt it was necessary to provide moral support and be with the person to boost her recovery.[6] In another incident, at the market in Bamako, a student who had bought only a small item offered to help another student who had lots of things to carry. The student declined, arguing that she was "an autonomous woman" and needed no help. More generally, the Swiss and the Malian students found it strange that the Guinean group featured no women; the Malians in particular teased the Guineans about it. The latter however playfully turned the situation around and accused the (male) Malian students of having ulterior motives in hoping there had been Guinean women in the group, making criticism coexist with laughter.

These instances and negotiations and the dynamics of criticism and teasing all happened outside the seminar room. In preparation for the present article, students listed them independently of one another as important incidents for how the group bonded or adjusted to internal sociocultural differences. In retrospect, the organizers had to realize that more social activities outside the seminar room in Bamako could have significantly improved the social, and probably also the academic connections between the participants—a missed opportunity that could not be compensated online, as the virtual interactions, too, remained more academic than social, with communication focusing almost exclusively on project-related work and the thesis or dissertation writing.

Digital approaches

After the Bamako workshop, the first online seminar revolved around theoretical approaches to the social sciences in relation to Africa, with readings of texts by Paulin Hountondji (2011), Elísio Macamo (2019), Georges Balandier (1951), Jean Copans (2000), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), and Achille Mbembe (1992). Students collectively analyzed, discussed and prepared PowerPoint presentations on the texts in their international online groups and presented them to their peers and supervisors in their respective universities. Turning online with IDEAS coincided with the global Coronavirus

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[6] In turn, when a Malian woman and then a Guinean man fell ill in Tunis at the second workshop, most participants went to their bedsides.

pandemic, which arguably concretized a key tenet of the project: that individuals are linked transnationally, across borders, by means of telecommunication, through migrations and cultural adaptations (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996), eventually confronted with shared realities like pandemics and climate change (Latour, 2018). More than we could have imagined beforehand, the pandemic underscored the global nature of contemporary society, with a world-spanning public debate about the virus showcasing multiplex divisions and suspicions (Lee et al., 2021; Philipps & Sagnane, 2023). Moreover, in an increasingly virtual professional world discovering the "home office," the project's aim to explore the potential of digital resources in interregional academic experiments turned out to be an idea whose time had come.

This does not mean that the transcontinental online meetings were smooth. There was an evident disparity, for instance, between the digitally tooled university in Switzerland and its less-resourced partners in Guinea and Mali, where power and internet were often intermittent at best. Online groups struggled to find time slots for all members in different time zones, and some people were forced to leave in the middle of an online meeting due to scheduling conflicts. Others found it difficult to familiarize themselves with the different applications: Google Docs, Slide, Meet, Hangouts, PowerPoint, WhatsApp, among others. Nevertheless, the participants remained connected through these multiple platforms; trial and error was a practical way of testing the different systems and their potential advantages for academic exchanges. WhatsApp became the primary choice over Messenger and Google Hangouts for informal communication and sharing, while Zoom turned out to be particularly versatile among the live conference platforms. In March and April 2020, at the height of the pandemic, several events organized on Zoom reunited participants in Bamako, Conakry and Basel. From exchanges on the worldwide Coronavirus crisis to its local repercussions on students' thesis topics and work plans, these meetings helped maintain contact, discuss next stages in the project and stay on course under unpredictable circumstances.

With regard to the project itself, the eclectic response to the pandemic, whether thematically or relative to the multiple digital technologies, was at times less than satisfying. It became quickly clear that supervisors too lacked the time to follow students' activities adequately or even evaluate course-related assignments in time to control if students were learning according to plan. For the second online seminar, it was thus also a pragmatic choice to focus on the students' MA theses. Students submitted a textual summary of their MA research, and each candidate was asked to share a short video on Google Drive that summarizes his or her project. The feedback was then shared both in written and oral form via Zoom, and both between students and between lecturers and students.

The unforeseen

The Coronavirus also symbolized the tragic aspects of the unforeseen in the project. Most shocking in this regard was the passing of Noemi Steuer, the driving force behind IDEAS, on July 14, 2020—though from cancer and not from Covid-19. An exceptionally kind soul, Noemi was a friend and a mentor to many people in the project, and also the main organizer of IDEAS activities. Her death thus triggered both heartfelt responses and ripped a glaring hole into IDEAS as an organization. Coping at the same time with the uncertainties produced by the halt of international travel during the critical phase of implementation, it was unclear whether the second workshop would ever take place.

Previously, the second IDEAS workshop had been planned to coincide with the Swiss Researching Africa Days (SRAD) conference in October 2020 in Bern. But the organizer, the Swiss Society for African Studies (SSEA), reacted to the risk of pandemic-related travel restrictions and organized the SRAD online. From October 23-24, 2020, IDEAS project members thus participated in the SRAD conference as online participants, with a double panel dedicated to IDEAS students' presentations of their MA research and a roundtable discussion in honor of Noemi Steuer dedicated to questions of transcontinental academic cooperation. However, the SRAD conference in Switzerland coincided with the declaration of the election results in Guinea's highly contested 2020 presidential elections. For several hours, the Internet was shut down, which impeded several participants from Guinea to join.[7]

After the SRAD conference, IDEAS fell silent for a while. It was in the summer of 2021 that evaluator Tina Tra called co-coordinator Joschka Philipps, expressing the need for continuity that emerged strongly from her discussions with students, especially those from Mali and Guinea. Joschka had switched jobs and was no longer in Switzerland, but ultimately co-organized the second workshop with Mohomodou Houssouba, who joined the team as an independent scholar and long-time colleague associated with the Centre for African Studies in Basel. The initial idea of bringing the IDEAS students to Switzerland, however, failed. The Swiss authorities insisted on biometric visas from their consulates in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Each participant from Mali and Guinea would therefore have had to travel first to these countries before being able to travel to Switzerland. To circumvent such a logistical nightmare—and the costs of it—the workshop was shifted to Tunis, which allowed for a comparatively smooth travel with less complicated regulations for all nationalities.

The second workshop was held from 25 November to 2 December 2021 and focused on the purpose of social sciences and the different career paths for social science graduates. This thematic focus was geared towards attracting participants who had already transited into their professional life or were about to do so. Many students from Basel, for instance,

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[7] On 24 October 2020, then President Alpha Condé was announced the winner of the elections from 18 October. While many opposition parties had boycotted the elections, shutting down the Internet, and blocking access to social media were some of the many dubious tactics of the government to secure a third presidential mandate (Philipps, 2021).

had in the meantime either finished their studies or were working part-time. Yet, only one of the five Basel-based students made it to Tunis. The absentees mentioned scheduling issues, but of course, the Basel group's previous disappointment about the first workshop in Bamako may also have played a discouraging role.

Though diminished in size, the Tunis group could build on the cumulative collective experiences since 2019, both face-to-face and online, and a lively group dynamic emerged. Compared to the social awkwardness that had marked the first workshop, the participants created a generally inclusive atmosphere and entertained a number of common references and inside jokes, notably revolving around the concept of "witchcraft," which mysteriously was on everyone's lips in various circumstances to create a distracting environment and insouciant attitudes to mitigate cross-cultural inconsistencies and inconveniences. Another similar conceptual tactic was to refer to "the system" (referring to Prof. Bano Barry's presentation during the Tunis workshop on the politics behind the Guinean education system) in order to make sense of something that is not fully understood or takes time to explain. The two figures of speech thus functioned as unifying concepts that were routinely reacted to with collective teasing and laughter over meals or during a variety of organized evening outings and tourist excursions. It helped also that the workshop took place in the same hotel where everyone spent the night.[8]

Preliminary findings

The above sketch of the IDEAS project from 2019 to 2021 is a selection and synthesis of what students from Bamako, Conakry and Basel listed as key experiences as members of the project. An important aspect that emerges, besides and even more so than the academic activities, is the question of social distinction and cohesion. Though it may appear banal, it bespeaks one of the most important findings of this method: that international academic cooperation across Africa and Europe is a dynamic process of human-cultural contact, revolving around social resonances. Noemi's loss on the project showed more than anything how an academic project can also be seen primarily as a social entanglement based on human relationships. Exposing all members to the existential fragility of life, it fostered human resonances among project members. The strengthening of social bonds was manifest not least in the great difference between the social atmosphere at the Bamako workshop (2019) and the one at the Tunis workshop (2021). It is also strongly embedded in African social systems, as reflected in the concept of Ubuntu popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa (More, 2004:156) or the idea of "I am because we are" advanced by John Mbiti (1970). As Ifeanyi Menkiti (2004) notes, this conception of a

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[8] In the previous Bamako workshop, the Malian students had returned home in the evening, which added to the difficulties of overall group bonding.

person as a being in community is as much a descriptive concept as it is a normative one: the real social dependence between one person and another necessitates care and affection between persons. The one who acts according to this social imperative is acting morally well.

Yet, what is meant by acting "morally well" differs from one system of meaning to the next. In the extra-academic discussions that students diligently noted, every moment of interaction carried clues in people's search for discursive and behavioral equivalences or discrepancies. Participants were assessing the moral, emotional, and affective charges contained in words; they observed the gestures and looks between people and noted how groups formed in resonance to such affective charges. Besides trying to understand what was happening, they also needed to act, and sought to position themselves socially within and through these processes that attracted people's attention and prompted questioning, comparisons, judgments, and controversies. These fine-grained and open-ended interactions were of particular sociological interest to IDEAS participants. Whereas the academic performances followed comparatively familiar scripts and necessitated less dynamic and immediate responses, it was in social situations over lunch or in the course of longer personal discussions during a walk or a taxi ride that they formed ideas about what being an international student means in multiple social and geographical locations. In Tunis, the group strolls along the sand beach, with the poetic label "*méditation méditerranéenne*" (Mediterranean seaside meditation) had been memorable moments of impromptu discovery of the landscape, casual conversations with strangers, including tourist guides, joggers and training athletes. Similar spontaneous exchanges and discussions about the urban landscape and history started during visits across the city and outlying towns. Last but not least, the Tunisian setting added to the "African" heterogeneity of the project, with exchanges not between one "Northern" and one "Southern" institution, but multiple relations between Guineans, Malians, Swiss and Tunisians.

That being said, we must acknowledge severe limits to our methodology. Synthesizing the impressions and thoughts of roughly twenty people on a project from which they may expect opportunities in the future is unlikely to yield fierce criticism of the project, for instance. In general, we must ask: how far can an experiment deviate from conventional practices without becoming too disparate and unwieldy—both to the donors and to the organizers? And in return: to what extent can it use existing frameworks without subjecting its inquiries to their normative expectations?

REFLECTIONS: UNCERTAINTY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In a telling exercise during one of the last sessions of the Tunis workshop, students and faculty, mostly from Mali and Guinea, were asked to write down what they hoped that IDEAS would inspire and what they wished for, more broadly, concerning the future of social sciences. Their thoughts would be written anonymously on little cards. The translated contents of a selection of the collected cards are listed below:
Card: allocate a significant budget to the education sector
Card: platform to connect students (seminars)

Card: African students' access to digital libraries in (Western) Europe and Asia
Card: free movement and academic mobility – thematize and problematize the fact that even the African faculty member is not guaranteed a simple visa to present his or her knowledge to students and professors in the North
Card: build student housing on African campuses (chronically cramped, unhealthy and unsafe university residences in Africa)
Card: collaboration between academics and political actors
Card: mobilize role models, mentors, coaches to inspire students
Card: introduction to research methods
Card: plea – creation of a virtual library (national or regional scale)
Card: make IDEAS a source of inspiration for students who want to follow in the footsteps of participating professors
Card: create a framework for exchange between people with common interests and maintain a space for communication, collaboration, collaborative writing after the meeting
Card: to have a space for exchange between those who believe in an academic/scientific vocation and others interested in consulting or entrepreneurship.

These cards allude to widespread concerns about the social sciences as an increasingly underfunded and at the same time overcrowded set of academic disciplines. The need for collaborations and connections, and for continuing IDEAS as a platform, emerges clearly. Moreover, the demand for extra-disciplinary training in "entrepreneurship," "consulting" or "contact between academics and political actors" also speaks to the difficulties for social science graduates to get a job—an estimated 70 percent of young Malian academics are searching for employment (Ludwig, 2017). While the situation is arguably less severe in the so-called Global North, anxieties over job insecurity loom large across the globe, and particularly among the "academic precariat" of the humanities and social sciences (Burton & Bowman, 2022).

Precarious positions and legitimate defense

In such a situation, the social sciences have everything to gain by justifying the relevance of their fields and the usefulness of their intellectual production. It is a legitimate defense in a system characterized by a historical bias towards techniques and technologies whereby the humanities and the arts, but also the social sciences and other so-called "soft" disciplines are relegated to the background. In the hierarchy of public spending, especially in less prosperous countries such as Mali and Guinea, funding for the social sciences is often decried as a disinvestment in the "hard" sciences, STEM, which are considered the pillars of economic and social development. This developmentalist view is not new. Already after independence, mathematics, natural sciences and engineering received the majority of funding. For example, a recent study shows that up until the 1980s, scientific fields received the majority of Malian high school and college students. In Mali, this trend

was only reversed in the 1990s, notably with the creation of the national university in 1996 and the ensuing explosion of enrollment in arts, humanities, and social sciences. It is estimated that the ratio now stands at more than 80% in literary studies, humanities and social sciences for less than 20% in mathematics and natural sciences this time around (Seydou 2018).

The presentation of these figures at the Malian Symposium on Applied Sciences prompted indignation across the auditorium, especially among the veterans of the science-oriented school of the 1960s to the late 1980s. The STEM advocates could barely hide their perception of social sciences as "parasitic" smoke screens, a sort of homeopathy or placebo when the disease of underdevelopment calls for "real" medicine. This means that in the eyes of many, the social studies are at best tolerated as extras and elements of the scenery, but not as serious actors in the resolution of the urgent challenges faced by societies increasingly dependent on the great technicality of everyday life.

This attitude has dire consequences and often results in sharp cuts in funding. In 2017, for instance, the Malian government cut off funding for the entire year to the Institut des Sciences Humaines, successor to the historic Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), and related institutions. The only projects funded were through inter-university cooperation funds such as the "Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in World" (HAB) program piloted by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS Leiden) in the Netherlands. Since 2020, most institutions have only barebone operational budgets. While not all other fields are better off, there is often more external funding elsewhere. Research laboratories for molecular biology dealing with malaria, AIDS, Ebola and more recently the Coronavirus, for example, have been receiving a steady stream of American and European funds for almost three decades, which seem to be more resistant to the political and social situation of the moment. For humanities and social sciences, even a three- to five-year financial commitment seems enormous, an expression of long-term cooperation. As a three-year project, IDEAS is a case in point, with unfortunately little effects on institutions and, as must be apprehended, low sustainability.

Purposes and power imbalances

If there is a need to explain the purpose of the social sciences, if only to brand and sell social scientific "knowledge" in a neoliberal competition over jobs or state funding, such an exercise refers us to several competing, if not contradictory, imperatives. Among IDEAS participants, too, there were multiple views on whether the social sciences need to concentrate on foundational research (conceptual work and basic understanding of social problems), or instead should work towards applicable solutions to such social problems (applied research, usually financed by NGOs and international "development" organizations). A potential middle ground of "foundational applied research" was proposed at the Tunis workshop by Elísio Macamo: it would start with trying to understand why people consider something to be a problem in the first place, to delineate the conditions under which a problem exists. Only when we have an answer to this question can we

identify the parameters that inform the interventions to be conducted and the search for solutions.

The question over the purpose of the social sciences also seemed to revolve around the distinction between two French concepts of knowledge: that of *savoir* (knowledge) and that of *connaissance* (expertise or know-how). While know-how is seen as a matter of applied mastery (craft and technique), knowledge designates a more diffuse domain of intangible competence, the capacity to think (about) the world, to come up with new ideas that are worth being listened to. It remained difficult for Guinean and Malian students to see themselves occupy such spaces for the production of original and new knowledge. As a Guinean participant put it, an open academic debate on social issues, or the idea of working towards new conceptual and theoretical approaches "has not yet taken shape" in Guinean universities. Most of the research and teaching, he argued, consists in gathering and reproducing classic social science concepts, theories and methods.

If the danger is to fall back into Afropessimism and the misleading "fairytale" of Europe's advance due to enlightenment (Macamo, 2014), a sociological way out is to focus on the power dynamics that undergird how different knowledges are valued, the norms in which knowledge is rooted, the standards that turn some people into social scientists and others into informants. For these norms include not only formal competences such as academic writing, but also the persistent biases and unequal relationships that permeate academic environments. Gender biases, for instance, clearly also structuring the spaces of the IDEAS project, still make it much easier for men to be taken seriously than women (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Federici, 2012; Tamale, 2020). And while unequal relationships and extractive practices are always apparent in the relation between the "practitioner" and the "academic", they are particularly urgent in the case of international collaborations between "partners" from the North and the South (Chagnon et al., 2022).

At the University of Conakry-Sonfonia, for instance, the Ebola outbreak of 2013 and the Covid-19 epidemic saw widespread extractive research practices by foreign "experts" who "collaborated" with Guinean research assistants to draw on their knowledge and data collection services. While the fieldwork was carried out with the help of Guinean researchers, the products of this research, the recommendations, action plans and the publications in international academic journals were developed almost exclusively by non-Guineans—Abdoulaye Wotem Somparé (2020) remains the only Guinean researcher to have published a book on the Ebola epidemic. And although the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) funded a public health research laboratory, the Laboratoire d'Analyse Socio-anthroplogique de Guinée (LASAG) at the University of Conakry-Sonfonia, the funds announced by UNICEF to serve as an operating budget never arrived.

Extraction has marked relations between Africa and Europe, including in Switzerland, and the absence of an explicit Swiss colonial past is no longer an untouchable argument, not least thanks to rigorous and courageous social science scholarship (see David, Etemad, Schaufelbuehl, 2005 & 2020; Koonar, 2014). Pioneering publications have traced the involvement of Swiss entrepreneurs, companies, private and public figures in the colonial

economy, the role of Swiss-owned plantations in the Caribbean during slavery, transportation and trading by Swiss shipowners, import-export of colonial goods, national industries oriented towards and involved in the triangular trade, subsequently integrated into the colonial market, and the economy of evangelization (in which the missions of Basel and Lausanne played a pivotal role), as well as the market of art objects (in which museums, galleries and ethnographic museums became global players). The social scientific re-examination of Switzerland's position in the international markets of the past and present has thus succeeded in debunking the long-standing official discourse of Swiss isolationism and neutrality. The latter, an institutionalized faith erected as an existential prerequisite for Swiss politics in the world, has always been at odds with the demographic profile, the (globalized) economic structure and the social dynamics of the Swiss federal state.

Faced with such intersections of transcontinental pasts and presents, the contemporary relevance of humanities and social sciences is imposed neither by the trope of globalization-as-homogenization, nor by that of unbridgeable socio-cultural differences. Rather, it draws from the heterogeneity, complexity and evanescence of the foundations and structures of contemporary society. In other words, defining the purposes of the social sciences poses an interminable challenge, in which it is necessary to avoid the illusion of novelty. The acquisition and transmission of knowledge, the construction of "libraries" as knowledge bases, have always been accompanied by questions: What is it for? How are we going to live with it? Do we live better or worse with these new acquisitions? How can we remain human in the face of the technological change, especially the digitization of everyday life? These are some of the questions that the humanities and social sciences try to answer. They are not new, but they are posed with a different acuity by the nature of the objects and impulses, sometimes intangible, that populate our daily lives and exacerbate the feeling of existential vertigo.

PARTING REMARKS

The IDEAS collective set out to create a shared space for participants from three universities in the North (Basel) and the South (Bamako, Conakry). It was designed to enable open and critical exchange, thinking and action through iterative interaction made possible by a digital platform; in fact, a loose aggregation of accessible and mostly costless tools adopted through habit and comfort of use. For the rest, there was no script anticipating specific outcomes. The idea was compelling enough; that of forming a nurturing community of learning and action, moving into the unknown through collegial concertation and deliberation, despite the inbred hierarchies in the social and professional categories and states at work (student-teacher, male-female, initiated-novice, well endowed-low resourced). Even if there was a measure of idealism before the start of the venture, the obstacles, difficulties and barriers that would confront such a heterogenous group were anticipated from the outset—whether material, linguistic or cultural. And yet, various other challenges were added to the list, which not only affected the project but the world at large.

The outbreak of a global pandemic and the ensuing lockdown shook up and reawakened the "Northern" or "Western" parts of the world previously couched in their

modernist certainties, to the limits of planning narrowly around economic indicators, predictable "futures" (in agrobusiness stock language) and reliable profits and other deliverables. As for less-resourced countries, especially in West Africa, despite stark disparities, the dire predictions made at the start of the crisis, fortunately, even mysteriously, did not materialize. The universities that had no choice but to close and wait out the worst timidly reopened and escaped the predicament that conventional wisdom would expect. They fared better by no feat of superior planning and execution either

The main aim of our narrative has been to present the experience as pedagogical intervention, (digitally) mediated socialization, experiential immersion, intercultural (mis)communication, and many contradictory objectives and outcomes. From this reckoning, it will be hard to draw an enticing conclusion as required. Still, we might be able to say that the exercise keeps us in a studious disposition in relation to the set of questions posed at the beginning of the program. In this regard, it is worth restating a key proposal made by Elísio Macamo during the Tunis workshop: "start with trying to understand why people consider something to be a problem." This is not a comfortable starting point for the budding or seasoned "expert", often called to treat a predefined problem, on whose existence depends his or her very livelihood. It is also a slight departure from the focus of the initial question on the hierarchies and biases ingrained in the valuation of social sciences. We accept this as the price of somewhat maturing through the exercise, experience, uncertainty, doubt, chance, misfortune, and all the concurring events that ultimately made the process a valuable but naturally unfinished lesson for us.

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