

***How can Eastern European scholars diversify and challenge constructs, theories and paradigms that remain rigidly informed by experiences of colonialism and racism in Western Europe and North America, including ‘whiteness’ studies? A Roadmap***

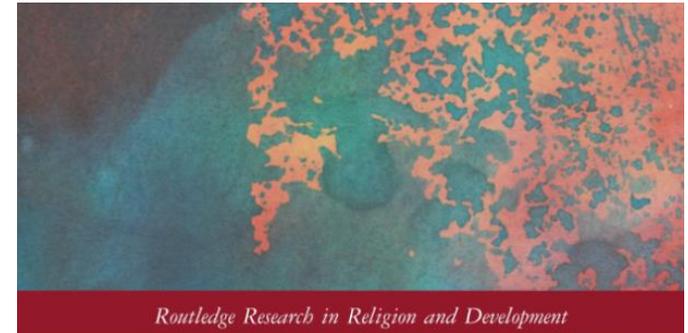
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# My background & positionality

Born in Moldova at the dawn of the Soviet Union; raised and educated in Greece 1994-2008; completed BA in the US, MA and PhD in the UK

Critical international development researcher and practitioner with decade-long experience in sub-Saharan Africa working to:

- Address the disconnect between gender & development theory and lived experiences
- Decolonise religious, gender and development studies of western assumptions
- Address issues with gender dimensions in culturally-sensitive & embedded ways



## ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
IN ETHIOPIA

Romina Istratii



1. Understanding the system today: western Euro-centrism and colonial legacies
2. Shifting attention to Eastern Europe: the relevance and inadequacy of post-colonial/decolonial frameworks
3. Deconstructing concepts and theories and reclaiming history: discovering and critiquing
  - ‘Europe’, ‘Byzantine’, the ‘Balkans’
  - ‘Whiteness’ and ‘white supremacy’
4. Activist initiatives to praxistically change the discourse

# **Understanding the system today: western Euro-centrism and colonial legacies**

# Western colonialism through Southern eyes

Historically, the Western European colonisers projected their worldviews, interests and understandings of humanity onto the 'other.' Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o described the experience of western colonialism as follows:

***Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others*** (1986, 16).

In other words, colonialism was material and ideological as much as it was epistemological: employing fundamental ideas about humanity, civilisation and progress to propagate itself and its objectives.

# Continuing colonial epistemological legacies

Western epistemology has dominated and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies. For example,

- International development built on the legacy of the ‘civilising mission’ (Manji and O’Coill 2002, Rist 2014)
- Religious studies on western societies’ experience with dogmatic theology and secularism (Asad 1993, Istratii 2020)
- Gender studies in response to social sexism propagated via ‘humanistic’ assumptions (Oyěwùmí 1997, Istratii 2020), etc.

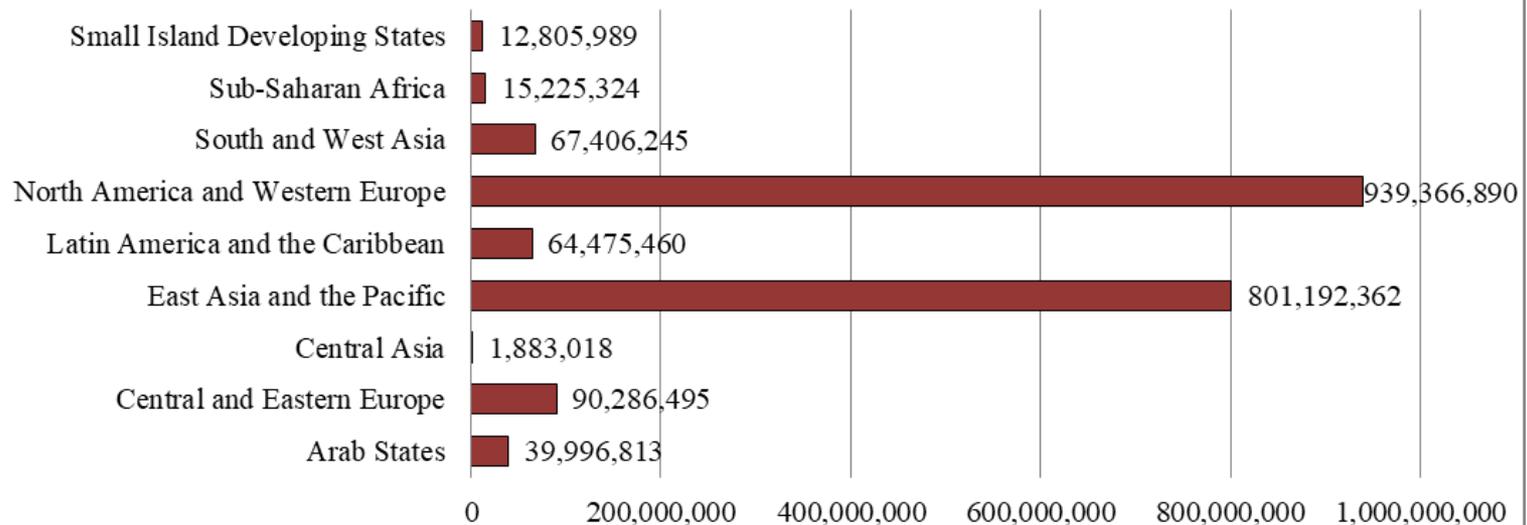
In contemporary times, a lack of recognition about the “epistemological situatedness” of theory and limited self-reflexivity about personal positionality in research and knowledge production means that western Euro-centric assumptions continue to be transposed cross-culturally and to dictate paradigms cross-culturally.

**We need to recognise that all individuals are “epistemologically situated” (Ladson-Billings 2005, 258; Istratii 2017, 4). Situated knowledge is knowledge that is informed by the belief and knowledge system of the theorist or the theoretical approach the latter is grounded in.**

# Normative and material factors that maintain western epistemological dominance

- Colonial legacies that favour the epistemology and theoretical frameworks of western researchers (e.g. emphasis on theory, university culture)
- Research partnerships defined by historical and on-going epistemological and material inequalities
- Funding structures that place more bargaining power in the hands of the western PIs
  - Global distribution of R&D funding (Arond and Bell 2009; Blotch and Sørensen, 2015)
  - Eligibility criteria and due diligence expectations (Istratii and Lewis, 2019)
- Anglo-centric research excellence standards and peer review norms
- Unequal distribution of publishing houses and dominance of Anglophone standards (Demeter 2019)

## Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D in '000 current PPP\$, 2016



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Sub-Saharan Africa: 0.7 percent of world total

Central and Eastern Europe: 4.47 percent of world total

North America and Western Europe: 46.5 percent of world total

# **Shifting attention to Eastern Europe: the relevance and inadequacy of post-colonial/decolonial frameworks**

# Some general observations

- Post-colonial/decoloniality discourses existent in the region (e.g. in the context of post-socialist studies), but not sufficiently influential in global debates.
- Indigenous critical thinking that does not fall within either Northern and Southern theoretical or praxistical frameworks not yet ‘discovered’ or given sufficient attention/credibility by Eastern European academics.
- Southern epistemologies increasingly ‘othering’ non-western Europe by subsuming the latter into the concept of Europe or within Northern epistemologies.
- Constructs employed grounded in the dominating Northern epistemology, primarily because the language/concepts used are not sufficiently problematised (e.g. ‘Eastern Europe’, ‘Balkans’, ‘empire’, ‘colonialism’, etc.)

# Are post-colonial / decoloniality studies relevant to describe Eastern European realities?

- They evidence the need to question that 'truth'/knowledge is always imbricated in geopolitics and ideologies of the day and never eschews the subjectivity of human 'knowing' in the world.
- Simultaneously, they do not suffice to understand the experiences we have had in our parts of the world vis-à-vis western powers and regional empires (e.g. Roman Empire, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire). Looking at these paradigms may help us to 'discover' our own distinct ways of thinking and critiquing.
- Genealogies of critical thinking around the concept of 'Europe', 'Byzantium' and the 'Balkans' have existed before 'decolonial thought' appeared on the horizon (e.g. by Greek-speaking theologians, historians, philologists and philosophers). These have been contested and marginalised by more powerful westernised discourses within these countries.

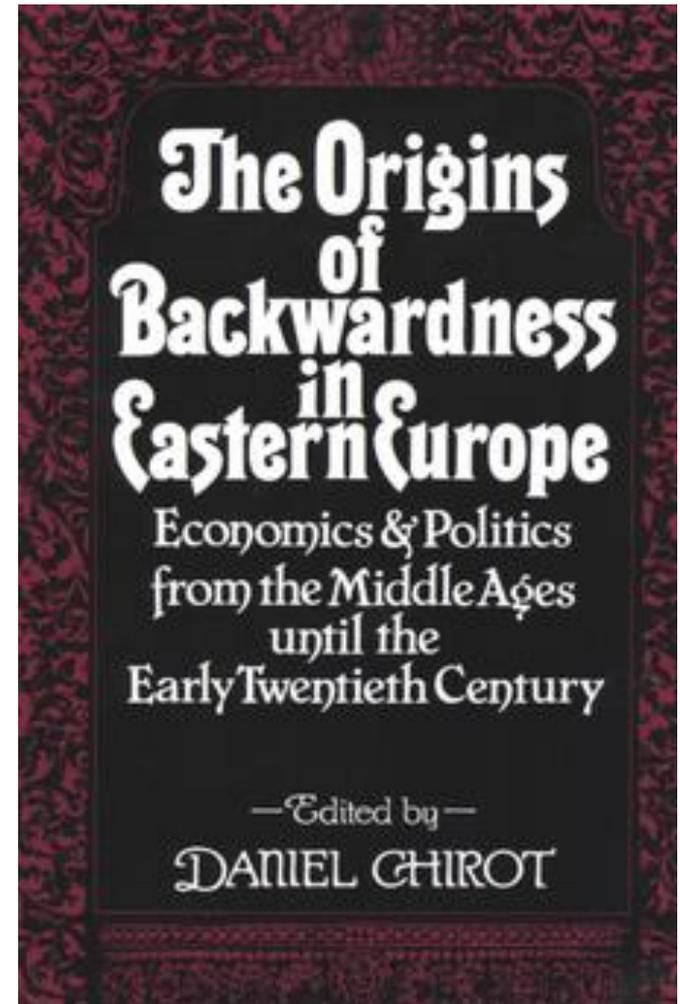
# **Deconstructing concepts and theories and reclaiming history: a praxis**

# Inventing 'Eastern Europe': A Northern perspective

The dichotomy Western/Eastern traced to Enlightenment, reinforced by Cold War politics and discourses (Wolf 1994)

*“Eastern Europe defined Western Europe by contrast, as the Orient defined the Occident, but was also made to mediate between Europe and the Orient. One might describe the invention of Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization.”* (ibid., 7)

Modern Greece exempted from the idea of Eastern Europe via the workings of ‘purposeful Hellenism’



# A critical appraisal

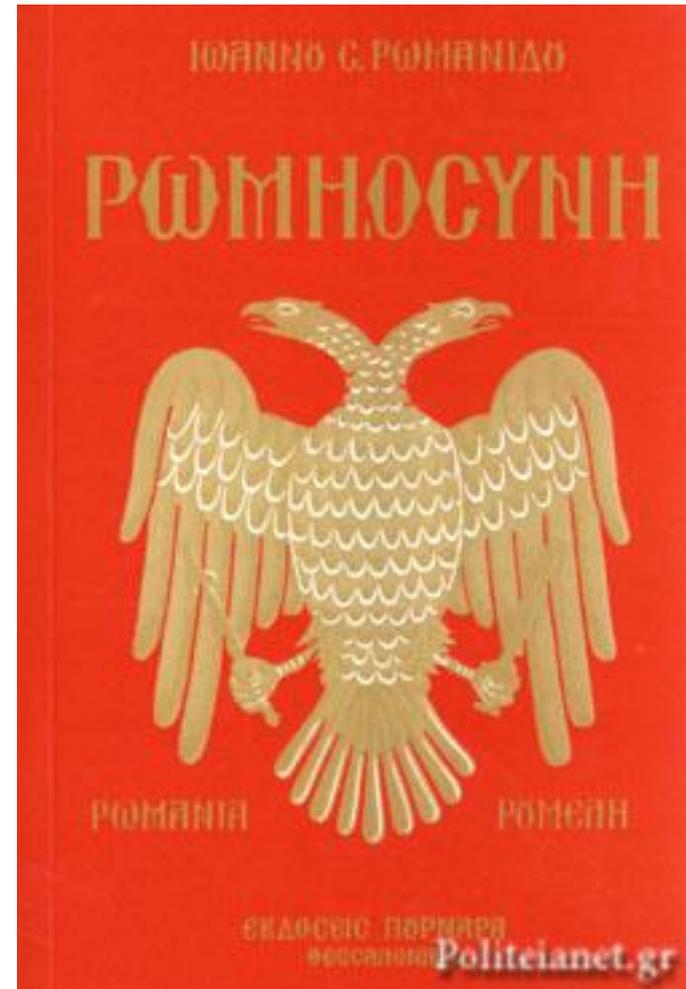
- Albeit situated in the ‘Middle Ages’, the book fails to recognise that the dichotomy East/West traces to much earlier events in the eight century.
- The idea of ‘Eastern Europe’ reflects a genealogy of events that shaped western imaginary about the East, tracing to the history of the Roman Empire and the differentiation/schism between the Roman East and the Roman West, less so for theological and more so for politically-motivated interests (see next slides)
- The invention of Eastern Europe is not disconnected from the invention of Western Europe and the development of western self-image *vis-à-vis* the ‘other’ (to whom it felt inferior towards rather than superior).

# The Franks' rewriting of Eastern Roman history

*Romania* covered at the time of Constantine today's England, Portugal, Spain, France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, the Balkans, North Africa, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and the Russian coasts of the Black sea.

Since the 700s, the Frankish and other conquerors of the Western Romans (Franks, Lombards, Burgundians, Saxons, Normans and Goths) steadily appropriated the name 'Roman Empire' and the title of 'Emperor', relegating the East Romans to 'Greeks' and the West Romans to serfs and *villains*, building a *Res Frankorum* on the back of the *Res Romana*.

The conquered peoples of these territories had once had a shared civilisation and consciousness that was repressed for political reasons.



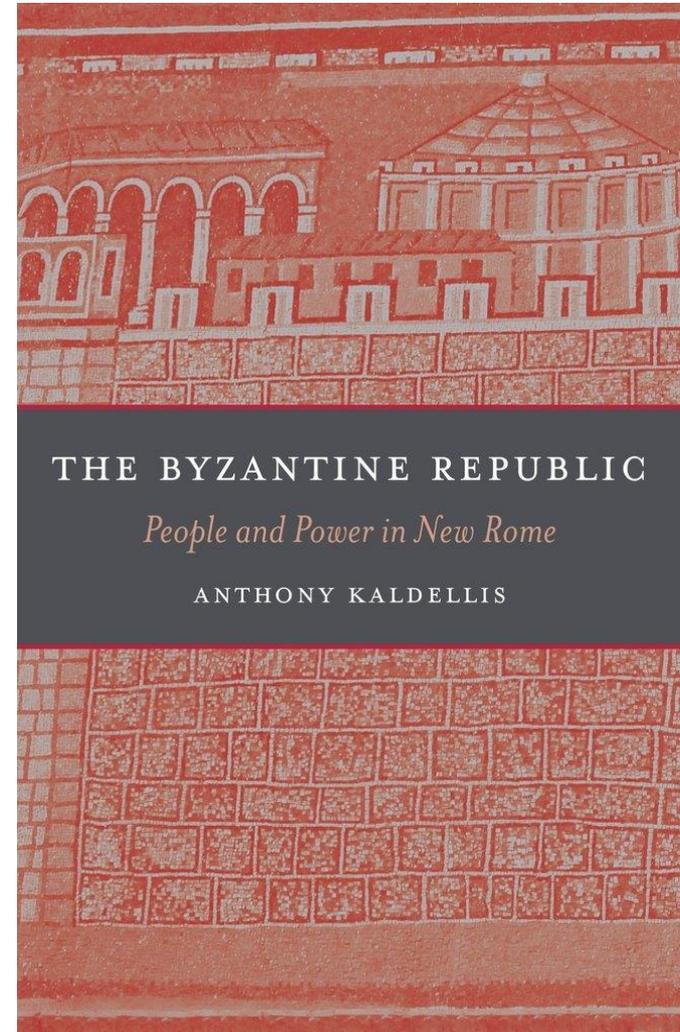
# The invention of Byzantium and European powers' balkanisation plans

- According to Romanides' investigations, in the nineteenth century, European powers (British and French) and Russians re-invented the 'Hellenes' as the citizens of the new Hellenic Republic following their Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. In this way, they aimed to give the impression that the Greeks were fighting against not only the Ottoman Empire, but its predecessor, the Roman Empire. This served their balkanisation plans, which would have been hindered if the 'Hellenes' re-identified as 'Romans', re-invigorating the shared historical consciousness of the various peoples comprising *Romania*.
- The tradition of referring to the Eastern Roman Empire as Byzantium (the non-Hellenised occupied empire) subsequently facilitated the appropriation of Hellenic glory by western Europe to build the image of an advanced civilisation.

***“The occupation of the Franks and the Turks was subordination of the body; Greacism and Neo-greacism is the subordination of the spirit (mind).”*** (Romanides 1975, 10)

# New Rome: a *politeia* where emperors were accountable to the people

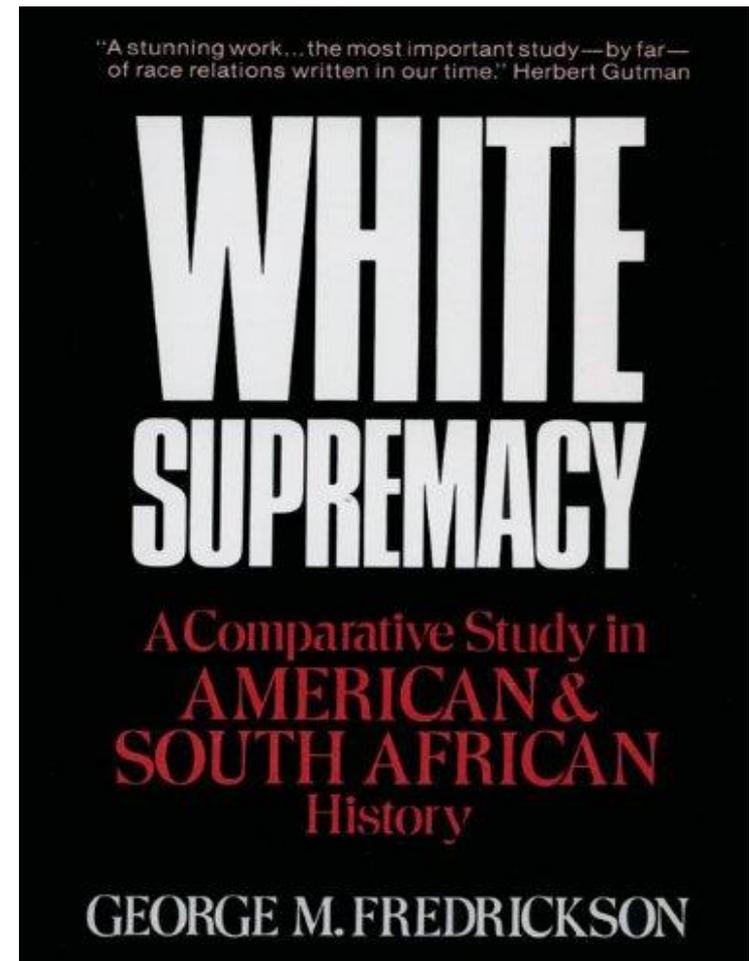
- Kaldellis noted the (politically-motivated) academic biases in Byzantine studies to deny the Roman identity of Byzantium.
- By working with Greek sources and understanding wider belief/thought systems, he evidenced that Byzantium was, in fact, a Roman *politeia*: a republican monarchy which held the emperor accountable to the rest of the polity.
- Emperors were brought to power by the people to serve as representatives of God in serving the common good. If emperors failed to do so, they could be dethroned with the public's participation.



- ‘Critical whiteness studies’ (CWS) emerged from the distinct histories of white settler regimes and slavery in North and Latin America and western colonisers’ experiences in African and Asian colonies. The field has been influenced by the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Franz Fanon and others (Applebaum 2016).
- In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon, referring to the colonial white man who forced an inferiority syndrome on the 'others' it encountered, wrote:

***“The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.”*** (1986, 110)

*“[W]hite supremacy refers to the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over “nonwhite” populations. In other words, it involves making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry. In its fully developed form, white supremacy means “color bars,” “racial segregation,” and the restriction of meaningful citizenship rights to a privileged group characterised by its light pigmentation.” (Fredrickson, 1981, xi)*



# A critical appraisal from the margins

- ‘Whiteness’ and ‘white supremacy’ discourses seem to assume that this is the only way of being white – what about being white among diverse Eastern European communities?
- CWS ignore diversity within the ‘white’ population and ‘white’ communities that were remotely connected to or did not partake in the type of segregation and inferiorisation of Blacks in North America, which largely motivated the field.
- This epistemological gesture becomes, arguably, a vehicle to transpose – yet again – western assumptions and categories onto the ‘other’: a decolonising discourse that is simultaneously re-colonising.
- **\*\*This critique is not a denial of problems of identity-based discriminations or ‘racial’ profiling in Eastern European societies, but a recognition that these phenomena need to be understood in reference to indigenous metaphysics of existence. \*\***

# Guided by lived experiences: Why if we defined 'whiteness' as Moldovan *omeniă* ('humanness')?

*Moldovean ca mine nu-i... (=There is no Moldovan like me...)*

Documentary by Mircea Surdu about Serge Mangole from the Congo living in Pepeni, Moldova:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uX8sc6lZ2oo> (2:48 – 4:41)

*"I never had a complex to think [in the lines of] 'I alone among so many white people.' I went one time to a village, if I am not wrong Ciuciuleni or (inaudible) also for soccer. We just alighted from the minibus (and) I saw an old lady was startled/scared, she crossed herself..." (strong laughter)*

*Yes, I am originally from Africa, I am not denying this, and I have no way to! (laughter) And the colour...even without saying anything, it is obvious that a person comes from the African region where it is hot. I have become accustomed here, I have 14 years [here] and I do not see the difference between myself and others."*

(Translation: the author)

# Suggestions moving forward

- Question and refine western concepts and theories used in a universalising or solipsistic manner from a history-informed and ethnographically-grounded perspective that captures diverse Eastern European experiences.
- Rediscover indigenous his(her)stories: 1. Translate for Anglophone non-specialist audiences indigenous/national accounts, 2. Bring these in conversation with Northern narratives, 3. Revise and nuance ‘mainstream’ historical narratives.
- Recognise the inherent limitations of one’s epistemologically situated knowledge, but also the advantageous position of speaking local languages and having lived in the contexts of study (Istratii 2020)
- Leverage reflexive and human-centred methodological approaches to strengthen the connection between knowledge-making and empirical realities.

# Activist initiatives to praxistically change the discourse

- Beyond questioning concepts, classifications and histories, it is important to subvert the current knowledge-making and publishing system holistically. Western epistemological dominance propagates systemically.
- *Decolonial Subversions* is the product of such efforts: open access, multilingual platform committed to decentring western epistemology in the humanities and social sciences.



# Decolonial Subversions: Manifesto

The journal is envisioned as a radically subversive initiative that tries to minimise the reproduction of publishing practices that perpetuate inequalities in the global production and distribution of knowledge. The motivation is not merely to facilitate publication for lower-income contributors located in either industrialised or lower-income countries, but also to stress that knowledge **should be free and freely shared** for wider use and critique.

- Eschews all article processing fees to enable everyone to submit their research and share their ideas.
- Encourages publication in non-western languages as pertinent to the contexts of research or practice & facilitates translations with the help of an international circle of language partners and translators
- Implements an open and dialogical peer review model to overcome hidden biases and to promote collaborations.
- Commits to a decentralised rotational editorialship model.

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