

# Decolonising Knowledge Production

# Knowledge Production in Pre-colonial India

- Archaeology shows that technology of gem cutting and drilling, copper smelting, and brick-construction to six thousand years; knowledge of alloy metallurgy of bronze, town-planning, double-storied constructions, gold-smithy, wheeled carts and lunar calendar to five thousand years; some kind of astronomy, mathematics and spoke-wheeled horse-drawn chariots to four thousand years; iron-smelting and herbal medicine to three thousand years; geometry and algebra to two thousand years, idea of the spherical shape of the earth, helio-centric planet-system, solar eclipse and trigonometry to one thousand five hundred years
- Over the travail of centuries knowledge production by uneven communities spread across the Indian sub-continent underwent the long processes of continuity and change involving innovations, additions and abandonment in the wake of marches and migrations of material cultures, interactive co-existence, assimilation and acculturation, relationships of control, stratification and domination, cults and sects, hierarchy and exclusion, invasions and subordinations, dissents and protests, incorporations and reconstitutions
- The major marches and migrations were of Mediterraneans, Persians, Macedonians, Parathions, Greeks, Kushans, Sakas, Chinese, Huns, Iranians, Turanians, Afghans, Pathans, Jews, Arabs, Mongols and Mughals who came to the sub-continent at different points of time roughly between BCE 1000 and A.D 1600, impacting knowledge production mainly in the north-west and north
- Knowledge had differences in terms of theoretical as well as technological levels from region to region at all times as required by materials and environment, and as enabled by the varying heritage of communities
- However, the Vedic, Upanishadic, Vedangaic, Jain, Buddhist, epic, puranic, sastraic, darsanic, vedantaic and sidhantaic knowledge, produced in old Sanskrit, Pali and new Sanskrit, is considered to be the corpus of ancient Indian Intellectual Tradition

# The *Margi* and *Desi* Traditions of Knowledge Production

- Traditions of knowledge production in the sub-continent were many but all of them underwent the processes of continuity and change in the wake of the dissemination of two major traditions represented by the Pali and Sanskrit respectively, which in their turn subsequently converged through the same process
- The central tradition is referred to as *Margi* and the local as *Desi*. The *Margi* worked as the master-text and theory, while the *Desi*, the practice. The latter though an application of the former, is unique in various ways.
- The *Margi* existed everywhere with upper caste-exclusiveness and *Desi* with the hereditary occupation-castes. However, the *Desi* always claim great antiquity and independent origin, but invariably following the epic-puranic traditions
- This overtly and covertly made separation between theory (as monopolised by upper castes) and practice (reposed as the *kuladharmma* of the lower castes) must have affected the growth of as well as diversity in knowledge production
- To a certain extent the processes of acculturation (*abhisankramana*) and assimilation (*pratisankramana*) helped the regulation of practices through theorisation, and improvement of theorisation through practices, respectively

# The Tradition of Knowledge Production in India that the British Colonised

- Theoretical knowledge production by upper castes and practical knowledge production by lower castes through the arts/crafts/practice prescribed under the *kuladharmma*
- Production and transmission of theoretical knowledge through the *gurukula* institution of *caste* exclusiveness
- Production and transmission of practical knowledge through the system of learning by doing the hereditary occupation under the elders of the *kula*
- Both theory and technology developed in the sub-continent in response to the upper-caste universal needs and lower-caste particular needs, respectively.
- However, they were not retarded in any case. The Indian knowledge in theory as well as practice was quite higher than that of the European countries before the Industrial Revolution
- It was this *gurukula* centred production of higher theoretical knowledge and *kuladharmma* based practice that were subjected to the process of colonisation under the British

# Why Industrial Revolution in Europe ? Why not in India ?

- Industrial Revolution owed its origins to the rising pressure of manufacturing and non-local distribution of manufactures
- This pressure in its turn owed to a series of interconnected developments such as the breakdown of the manorial system and serfdom, the emergence of a class of socially unencumbered labourers, revival of trade and markets, accumulation of money in the hands of the towns-men, migration of labourers into towns, transformation of the guilds into small factories, growth of production beyond local consumption, expansion of market, enhanced development pressure on productive technology, distributive need for quicker transport and so on
- Why India's higher knowledge in theory and practice failed to move on to a revolutionary development has to be answered probing into the historical process of the sub-continent, as to see whether it involved the emergence of any of the socio-economic pre-conditions
- Lack of aforesaid socio-economic developments of supra-local character, persistence of caste-based separation between theory and practice, rigidity of the caste system that precluded the circulation of theory and practice beyond the stipulations of *kuladharmma*, exclusion of about 80 % of the population from formal learning, confinement of theoretical knowledge to Sanskrit, a scholarly language inaccessible to the linguistically fragmented common people, and on top of all the British Colonialism that pre-empted the possibility of self-development, were the reasons

# What necessitated & Enabled Colonisation

- Colonisation was necessitated by the new economy of mechanised manufacturing, need for expansion of market beyond cultural borders, and scarcity of raw-materials
- The new economy owed its development to Industrial Revolution
- What enabled Colonisation has no single sentence answer. But if we try a one-word answer, it should be India's 'Colonisability'.
- India's political disunity, cultural conflicts among sects and cults, and the overall socio-economic and cultural backwardness of the people accounted for India's Colonisability
- The incoherent, unconscious, superstitious, caste-bound, dependent, localised and traditional self of India was easily colonisable

**Traditional Self**

**Incoherent**

**Superstitious**

**Dependent**

**Unconscious**

**Particular**

**Stable**

**Knowable**

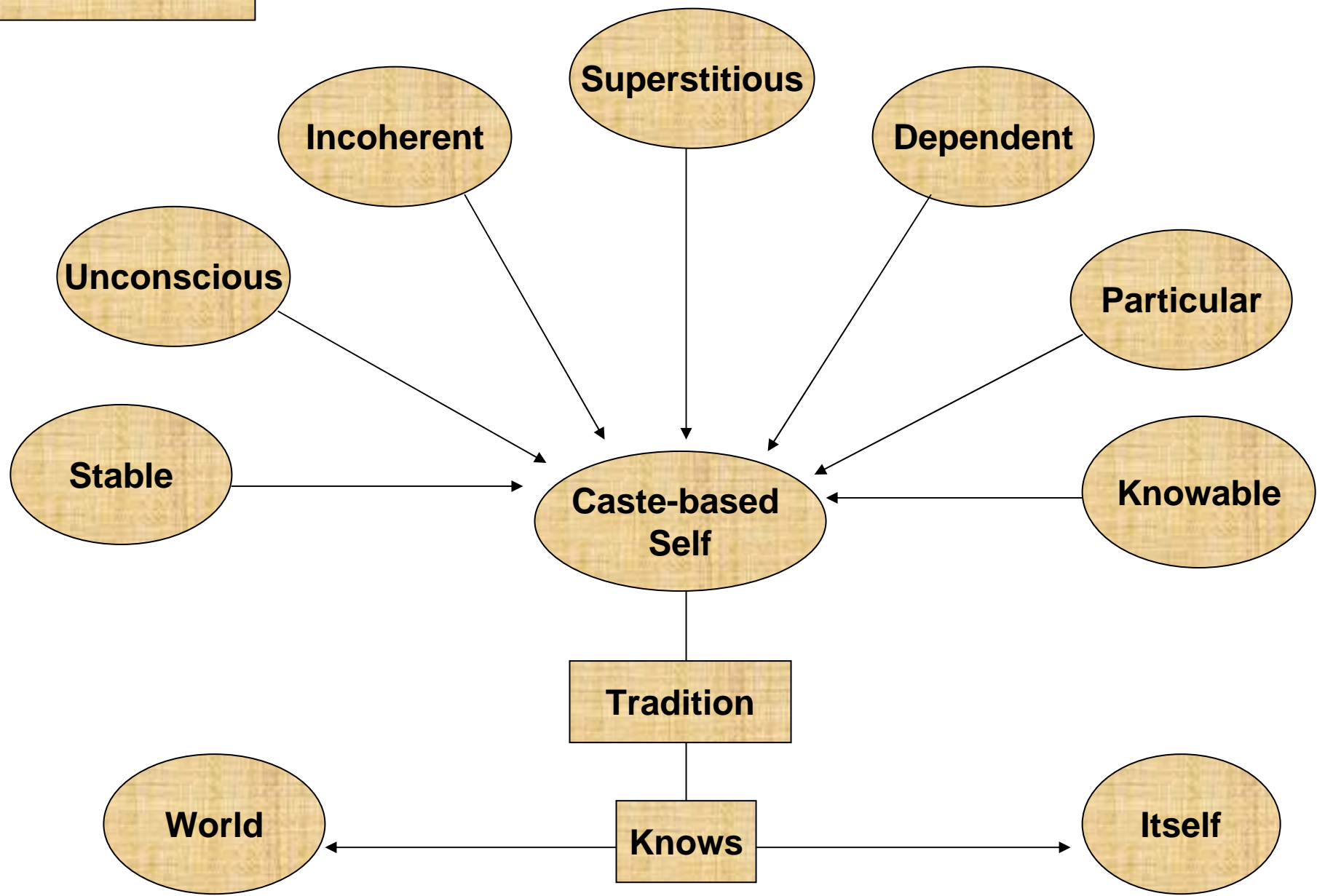
**Caste-based  
Self**

**Tradition**

**World**

**Knows**

**Itself**



# Dimensions of Colonisation

- Colonial Control was far more than mere political subjugation and economic exploitation
- Colonisation was an irresistible process of the penetration of Western culture into the local cultures and traditions, and their slow, traumatic and fundamental reconstitution from within rather than a sudden disruption or replacement
- It was a process of the transformation of the traditional self into a self-uprooting-self from within – a thorough revamping of the traditional worldview from within. It was like filling the old oil-bottles with new wine
- It was a process of voluntary acceptance of a set of new meanings, measures and parameters of knowing oneself and the world distinctively, following them to judge the right and wrong, and living them mechanically through ‘mimesis’
- It was a process of enthusiastic internalisation of the truth about oneself, one’s culture and the cultural past as represented by the West, and seeking to live the representation as real and ideal
- This internalisation of the coloniser’s representation of the colonised as truth by the colonised brought about fundamental changes in the regime of knowledge production
- Colonisation was thus a natural and easy process for a people largely ignorant of the knowledge systems of the cultural past of their sub-continent

# Epistemological Colonisation

- Epistemological colonisation began through the intellectualism of 'colonial modernity', a mixture of Positivist Utilitarian Individualism with rationality and objectivity of Science - the basis of authority, authenticity and superiority of European Knowledge
- European Technology was projected as the direct utility of science as well as undeniable expression of material power as opposed to the spiritual
- Indian Knowledge Systems were ridiculed as metaphysical speculations and axioms without proofs and procedures, generated by an inward-looking culture of spirituality and a people of superstitions and magical practices
- The cultural superiority of Europe was projected through its sense of history as opposed to its lack in India, and through great thinkers, philosophers and creative writers
- With the introduction of printing, English education, publication of books and periodicals and circulation Western ideas of human progress, opening of colleges and organisation of societies and academies of higher learning etc., epistemological colonisation became complete
- However, the colonised were strategically made to accept themselves as the 'inferior natives' as opposed to the 'superior Europeans'
- The colonised self was still represented as dependent, liminal, incoherent, unstable, and mimetic far different from the accomplished modern self

**Colonial Self**

**Incoherent**

**Colonial**

**Dependent**

**Uprooting**

**Liminal**

**Unstable**

**Colonised  
Self**

**Unknown**

**Mimesis**

**World**

**Knows**

**Itself**

**Modern Self**

**Coherent**

**Rational**

**Autonomous**

**Conscious**

**Universal**

**Stable**

**Accomplished  
Self**

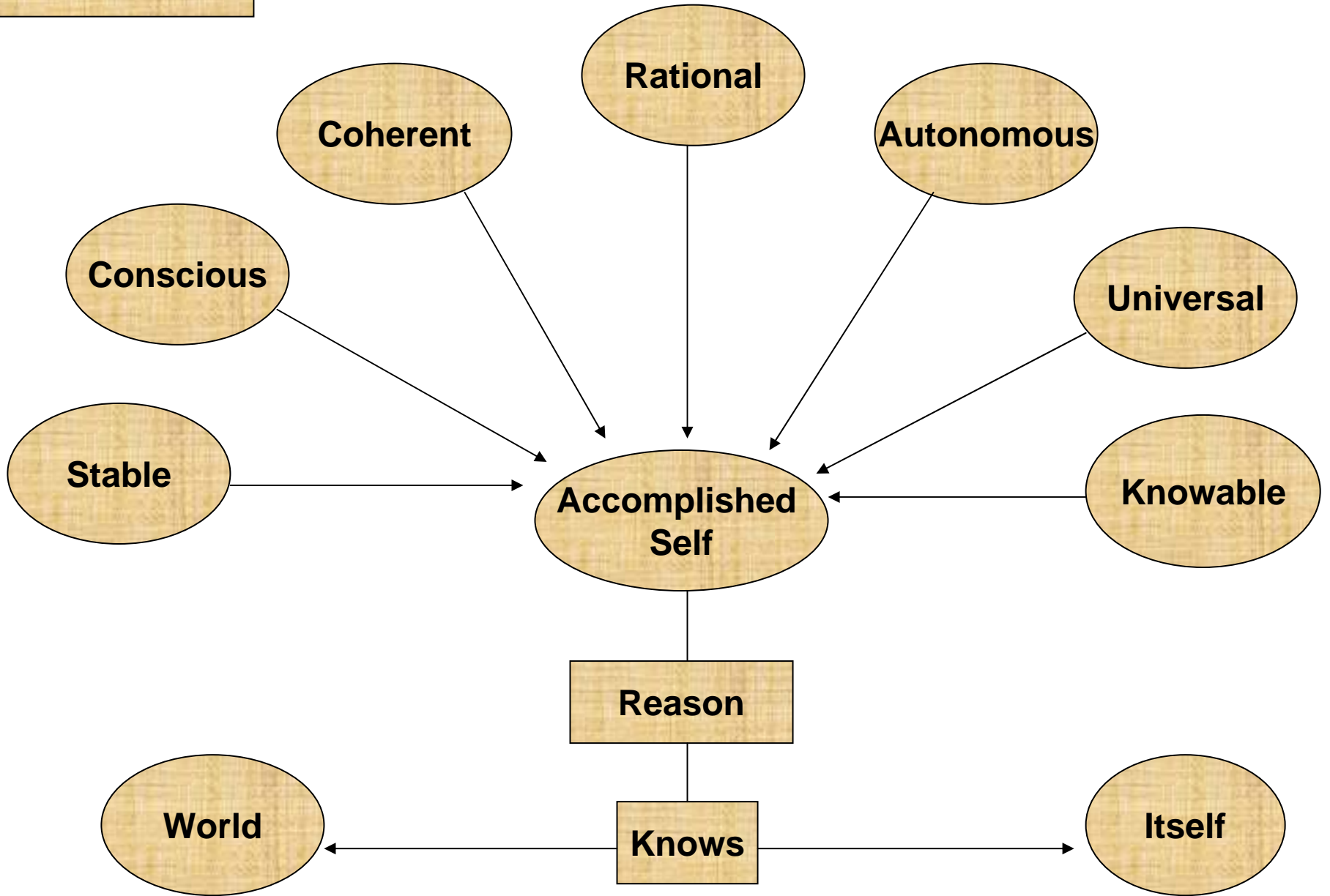
**Knowable**

**Reason**

**World**

**Knows**

**Itself**



# Consequences of Epistemological Colonisation

- The most disastrous consequence was the mimetic, derisive and scornful representation of the knowledge systems of Traditional India by the colonised themselves
- Wide-spread indifference towards knowledge systems in India and their popular branding as orthodox, superstitious and unscientific
- The general feeling that knowledge systems of India were unscientific as a whole, made them justify their historically contingent ignorance of the past knowledge
- Another consequence was the acceptance of Eurocentric history that suppressed contributions of Indian astronomy and mathematics that embodied knowledge which the Europe 're-invented' later. However, Sanskrit literature, logic, grammar and philosophy continued to flourish, thanks to the translation, redaction, edition and publication of ancient Indian texts by Europeans
- Though English translations and commentaries made some of the knowledgeable Indian texts accessible to the English-educated Indians, the Western worldview and rational outlook largely dissuaded them from trying to learn such texts
- The already discontinued epistemological traditions of the sub-continent got uprooted and the knowledge systems with some relevance to everyday life got mechanically reproduced and travestied by their shallow practitioners. The knowledge systems relating to rituals had lost their epistemological base even before that.

# Decolonising Initiatives in Knowledge Production

- Decolonising initiatives acquired strength with studies by Needham (1954-59), Syed Husain (1976), Edward Said (1978), Fahim (1982) and Van Sertima (1983) who challenged Rouse Ball (1908) who traced the rise of knowledge to Greece, and the discovery of Greek learning through Renaissance, and perfection of it as science for the world by Europe
- It was accepted the world over that Newton and Leibniz were the first to invent a generalised system of infinitesimal calculus in 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries
- Decolonising studies have shown that Indian mathematicians had made great strides in developing arithmetic, algebra (before Arab scholars), geometry (independent of the Greeks), and *infinite series expansions* and *calculus*.
- The astronomer-mathematicians of Kerala, such as Madhava and his disciples like Neelakanta Somayaji, Paramesvara, Jyestadeva and Achyutapisharoti had invented elements of calculus during 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries
- Decolonising initiatives involved assertions of Indian origins of the basics of European science. It has been argued quite likely that mathematics of India were transmitted to Europe from Kerala through traders and missionaries. Though there is no documentary evidence, the proof of methodological similarities, communication routes and a suitable chronology for transmission is hard to dismiss. (Almeida and Joseph, "Eurocentrism in the History of Mathematics: the Case of the Kerala School," *Race Class*.2004; 45, pp. 45-59)

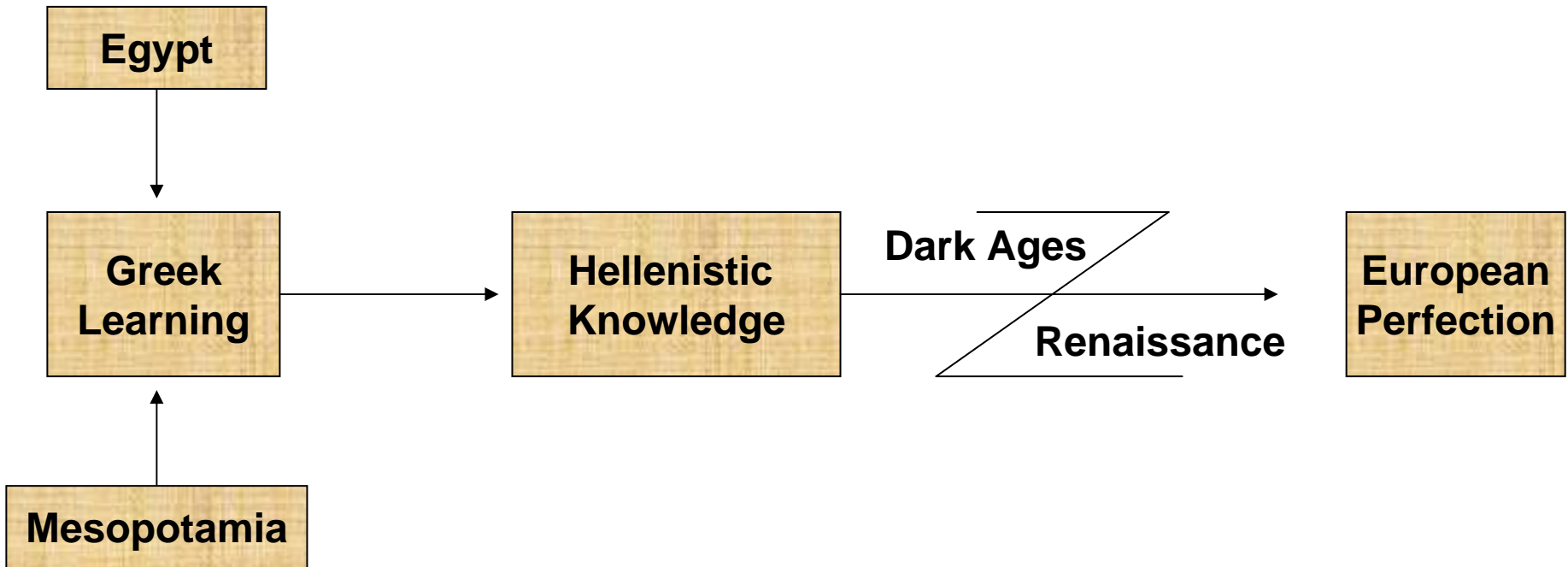
# Knowledge Dissemination: Eurocentric Trajectory - I

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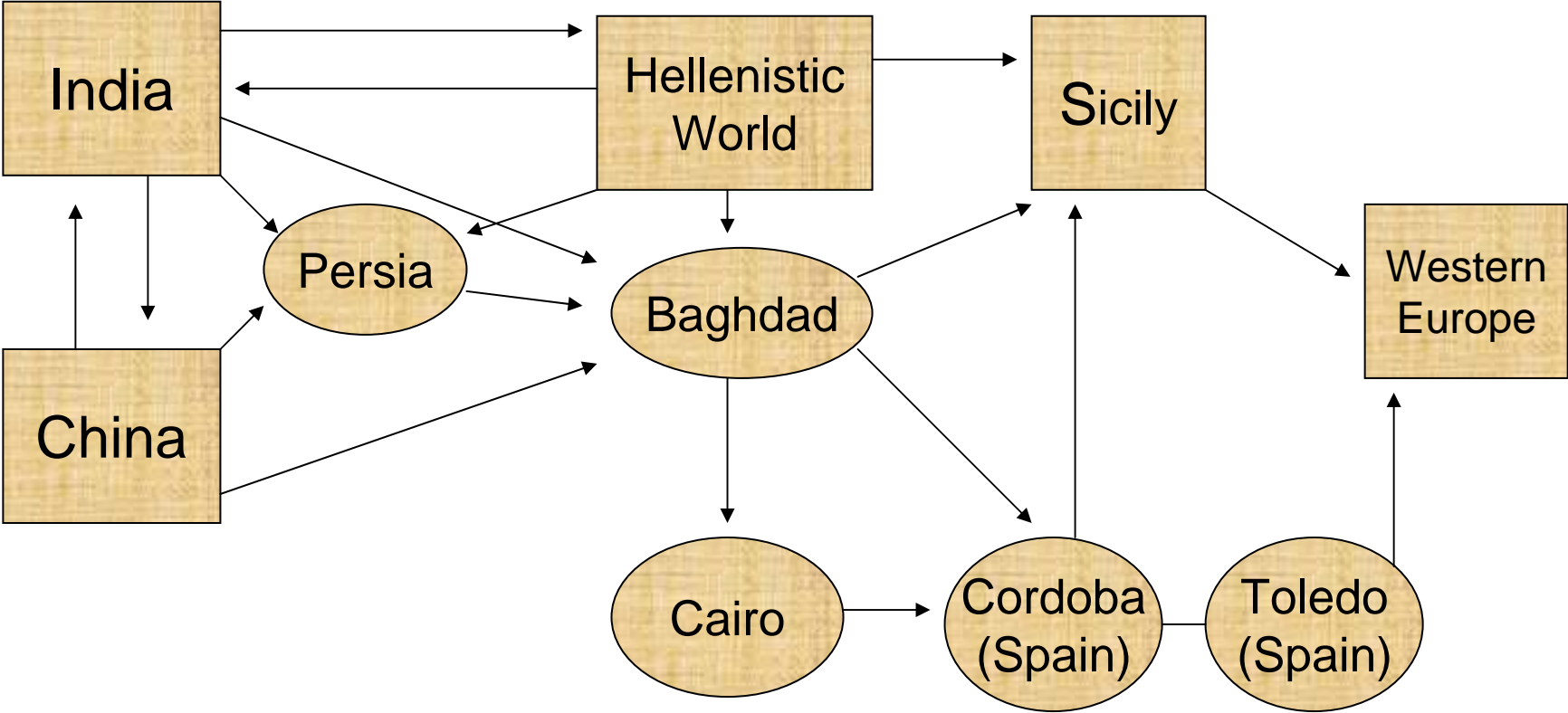


## Trajectory - II

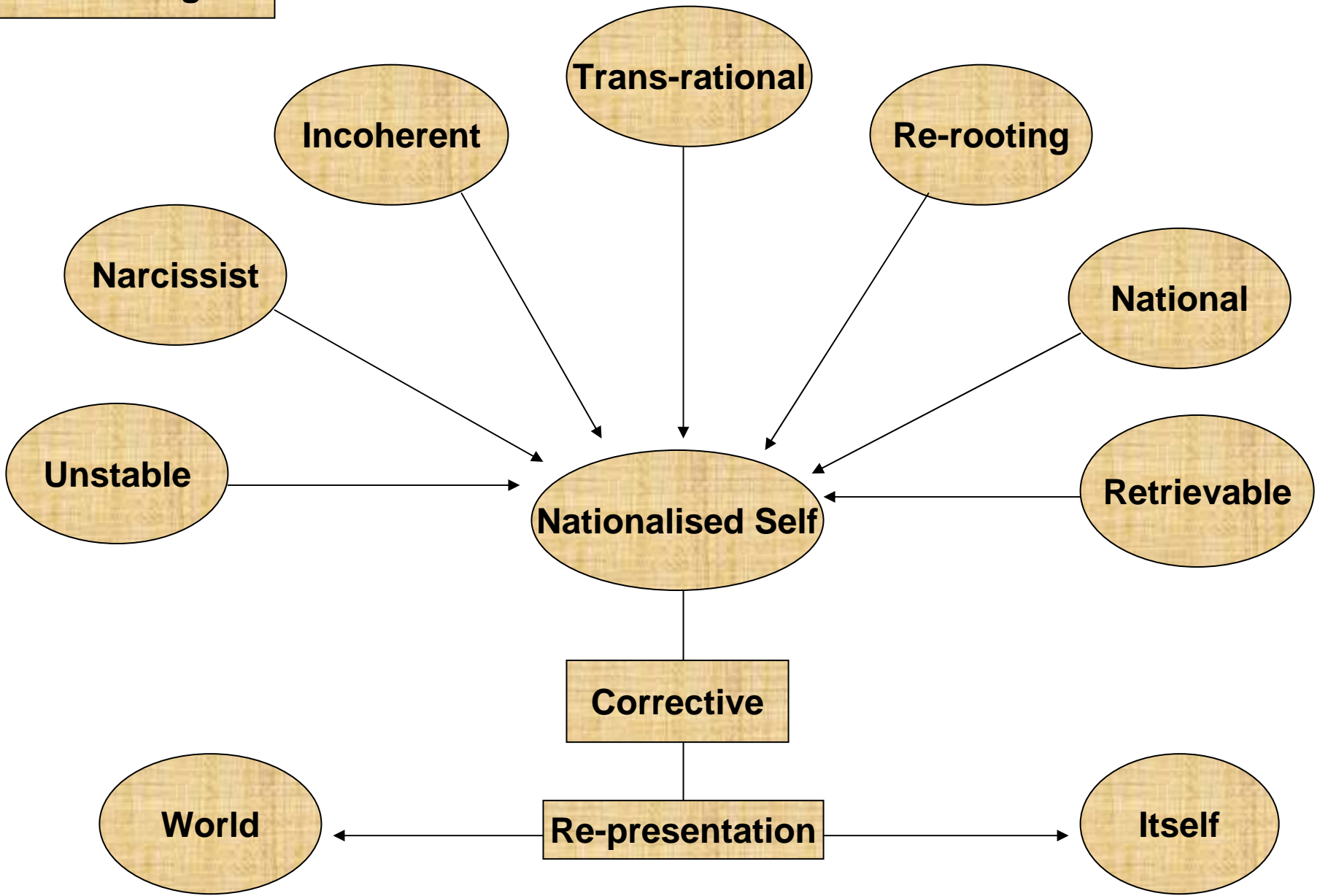
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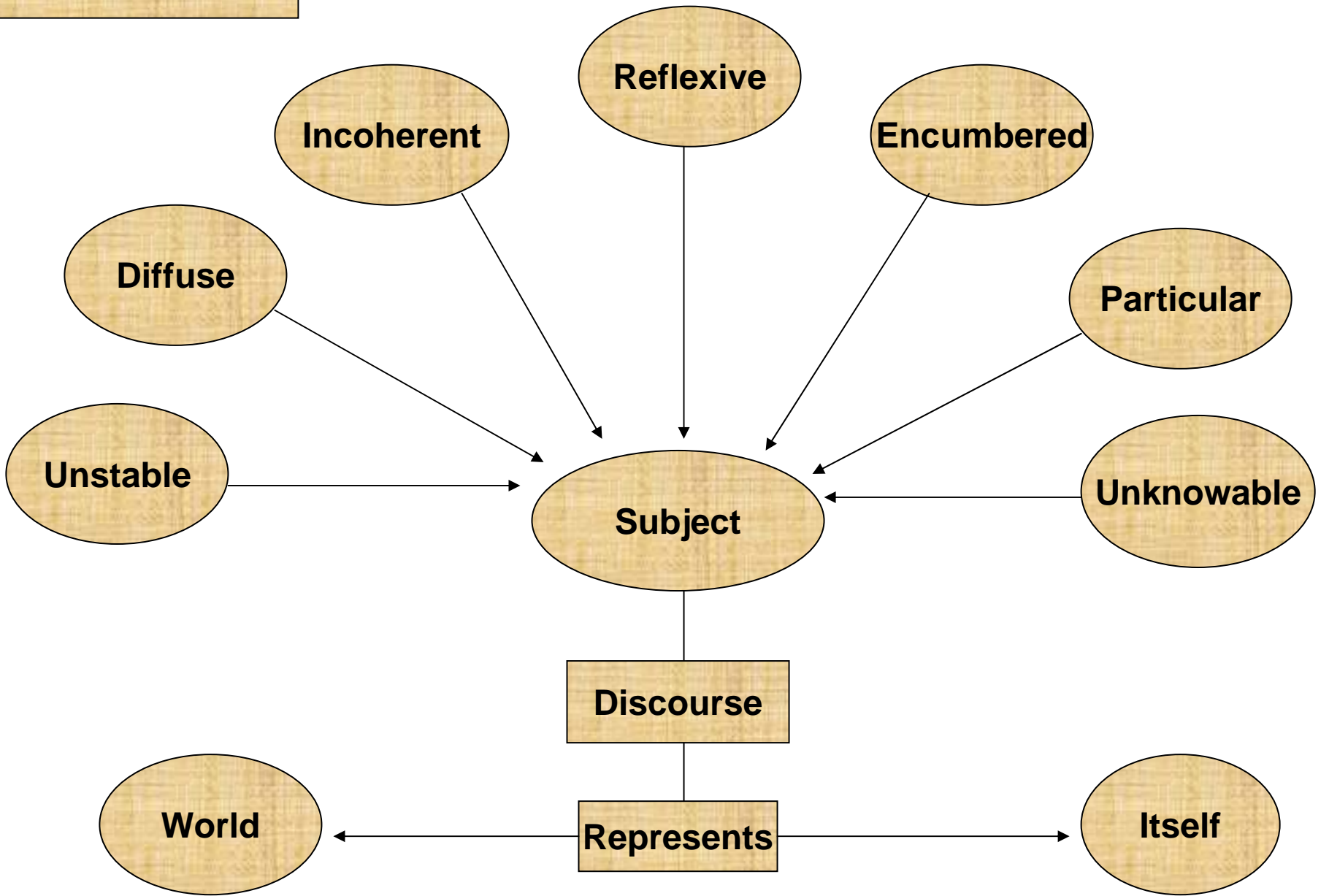
# Knowledge Dissemination: Decolonising Trajectory



**Decolonising Self**



**Post-modern Self**



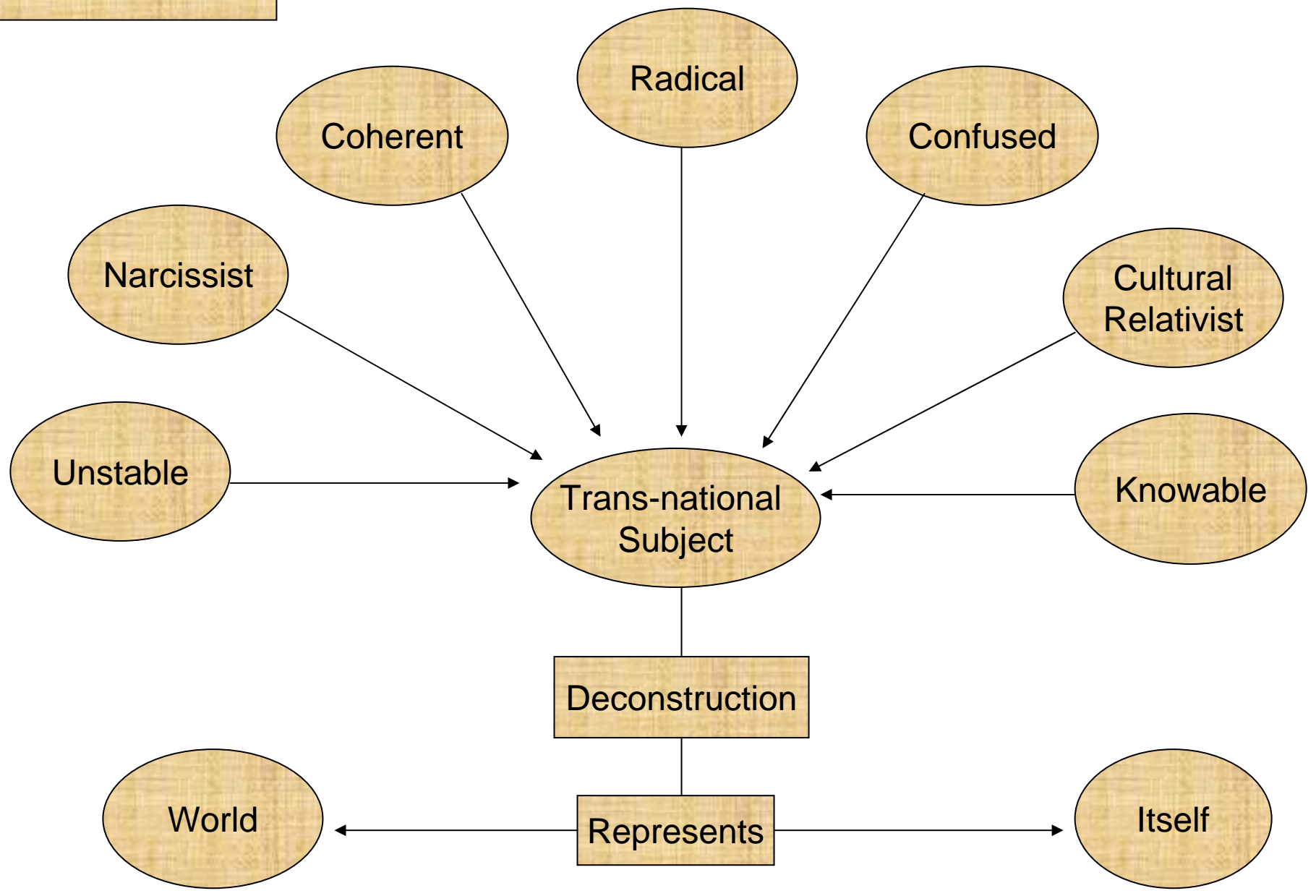
# Containment of the Decolonising Initiatives by through the Post-colonial Knowledge Production

- Postcolonialism holds that authenticity is relational, identities are not stable and self >< other relationships a matter of power, rhetoric, and discourse, rather than of cultural essence. (James Clifford in his book, *The Predicament of Culture*)
- Postcolonial studies concerned themselves with the 'other' the 'subaltern,' the 'subject,' the 'liminal' and the 'marginalised'. They articulated the plurality of centres
- Postcolonial knowledge production seeking to re-articulate the centre as well as periphery of discursive colonial strategies inscribed by the Imperial Project, cast a strategy containing the decolonising theories (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Chris Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 1993)
- Postcolonial writing as a re-inscription of a multiplicity of emergent identities (Chris Tiffin & Alan Lawson, *De-scribing the Empire* ,1994) and *De-scribing the Empire* with its specific focus on textuality, has almost contained and depoliticised decolonising initiatives

# Depoliticising Dimension of Post-colonialism

- The main problem with postcolonial intellectualism is that its intellectual project ends up with the playful textual game. Of course it leads to a rigorous description of the global relations and its resistance, takes place in the domain of textuality. The contestation of postcolonialism is a contest of representation. Its interest is in the epistemological plain of deconstruction rather than in the political plain of social reconstruction.
- It is infected by the colonizing nature of Imperialistic theories. If Colonialism was engaged in forcibly bringing the native minds to the European pattern of organisation of knowledge through sciences and laws, Postcolonialism trying to discover the process, re-enacts the same thing differently
- Postcolonialism spreads the apolitics of ignorance and it perpetuates ignorance as knowledge
- Postcolonial radical theories tend to grow unpleasantly narcissistic by being deprived of a political outlet. Its radicalism is not only ambiguous but also reactionary in closer analysis.
- Postcolonialism as such does not address the material exigencies of colonialism and neo-colonialism, including the neo-colonialism of western academic institutions themselves.
- Postcolonialism in the process of decolonisation inadvertently promotes sub-nationalist divisions, fundamentalist beliefs, identities – all legitimised and celebrated in the name of cultural plurality. It celebrates the binary of self >< the other

Post-colonial Self



Critical-modern Self

