

Decolonising Knowledge, Democratising Curriculum

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I am sorry I cannot join you for these discussions. They are important for the future of all universities, as similar issues are now being faced around the world. Responses include attempts to bring Andean cosmovisions into higher education in South America; work to increase the Aboriginal presence in Australian universities; debates in Muslim-majority countries about Islamic science and higher education. The South African debates have a particular intensity right now, and you have an opportunity to lead the world.

In this paper I offer reflections based on my research for *Southern Theory*, further research in the same field, and discussions with many colleagues, including in Africa. These remarks are intended as a resource, not a template. No-one yet has the right answers on these issues. But there is international experience that you can draw upon.

The global economy of knowledge

Since universities operate in all parts of the world, and their curricula are closely (though unequally) linked, it is important to consider the global picture. The best starting-point I know is the analysis by Paulin Hountondji in *Endogenous Knowledge* (1997), published by CODESRIA. Modern universities and their staff and students exist in a global economy of knowledge, with a definite geography of production and circulation.

This economy has a hegemonic centre, the knowledge institutions of the global North – not only the famous elite institutions like Harvard, the Sorbonne, CERN and CDC, but also the mass of universities, databanks and research centres supported by the wealth of European and North American society. This complex of institutions, as well as producing floods of new knowledge (dominating scientific journals in most disciplines), is the centre of intellectual authority in the mainstream economy. Universities in other regions generally follow US/European definitions of disciplines and research methods, and practices of publication and recognition. It is not surprising that their teaching curricula have been largely built on models from Northern universities.

This hegemonic position is not just a matter of the wealth of the global metropole – though that certainly helps! As Hountondji points out, the world economy of knowledge is built on a vast division of labour, with its roots in imperialism. For the last five hundred years, the colonized and postcolonial world has not only been a source of raw materials for the metropole's industries, it has also been a source of raw materials for metropolitan sciences. Data have

flowed to the metropole for botany, zoology, astronomy, geology, oceanography, climatology, sociology, linguistics, gender studies, and more.

In the knowledge institutions of the metropole, these data have been accumulated, archived, classified, interpreted, and combined with data from the metropole; and thus turned into the organized forms of knowledge that we now teach as university disciplines. In this division of labour, the *theory* part of the production of knowledge (conceptualization, methodology, analysis of causation, model-building) was located in the institutions of the metropole. The processed knowledge was returned to the colonial or semi-colonial periphery in the form of applied sciences, from agronomy and engineering to medicine and development economics. This continues to be the main pattern in the circulation of knowledge in the contemporary neoliberal world – though not the only one.

Within the mainstream economy, knowledge workers in the periphery *must* become expert in metropolitan theories and methodologies. Their careers depend on it, and are greatly advanced if they get recognition in the metropole: ideally, a PhD from a European or north American university, and publication in the top journals, almost all of which are published in the metropole. (In Australia, university promotion committees are keen on ‘international publication’, but international doesn’t mean México or Mozambique; it means the US and UK.)

Knowledge roles of the global South

A careful look at this history reveals that the hegemonic forms of knowledge in the global economy are far from being simply an expression of ‘Western’ knowledge. It’s well known, though often forgotten, that the number system used throughout quantitative science comes from Arabic, not European, sources. We still use an Arabic name for a vital branch of mathematics, *algebra*.

As the European scientific revolution advanced, data from the colonized world were not just marginal additions, they were crucial to the formation of specific frameworks of knowledge. Modern evolutionary biology, for instance, got under way with Darwin’s data-collecting in South America and the Pacific and Wallace’s in the Dutch colonies in the East Indies. Einstein’s general theory of relativity had its first important test in observations of the gravitational bending of light made in the Portuguese colony of Príncipe and the Portuguese ex-colony of Brasil, both societies shaped by the Atlantic slave trade.

Similarly, data brought to Europe by Humboldt from Spanish colonies in South and Central America helped form modern climate science, and that pattern continues. Atmospheric CO₂ accumulation was first tracked by measurements in the US colony of Hawaii, seized from Polynesian rule half a century earlier. The current global models of climate change, the science in the famous IPCC reports, depend on vast flows of information from the global South.

The colonized and postcolonial world, then, has actually been a major participant in the making of the dominant forms of knowledge in the modern era, which we

too easily call 'Western science'. The problem is not the absence of the majority world, but its epistemological subordination within the mainstream economy of knowledge. This economy has been profoundly shaped by what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000) has called the 'coloniality of power'.

In consequence, a wealth of knowledge produced in colonized and postcolonial societies has never been incorporated into the mainstream economy, or is included only in marginal ways. As this is the resource at stake in debates on decolonizing knowledge, it is worth noting its three main forms:

First, *indigenous knowledge*, the locally-based knowledge created before colonization, which in most parts of the world continued to exist, in an increasingly marginalized position, while the global economy of knowledge was built. Colonialist ideology generally dismissed this knowledge, though sometimes acknowledging it as practical expertise (e.g. indigenous north American or Australian Aboriginal expertise in tracking, predicting weather, etc.). Transnational corporations now trawl indigenous knowledge for profit opportunities, for instance pharmaceutical companies in search of new drugs, resulting in struggles over 'intellectual property'.

There has been growing appreciation of the sophistication and scope of indigenous knowledges. It is recognized, for instance, how precise knowledge of the natural world made it possible for whole societies to live and flourish in apparently very harsh environments. Indigenous social knowledge was important in the resilience and survival of communities under the violence of colonial conquest. It is also better recognized that indigenous knowledge is not static, but has always been able to adapt and grow. (For perspectives on indigenous knowledge see Odora Hoppers 2002 and Smith 2012; for the recent Bolivian experiment in setting up indigenous universities, <http://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/book/bolivias-indigenous-universities>.)

Second, *alternative universalisms*, i.e. knowledge systems intended to have general and not just local application, whose logic and authority do not derive from the Eurocentric knowledge economy. Much the best known is Islamic knowledge, familiar to the rest of the world for its golden age in philosophy, mathematics and natural science. Islamic knowledge did not stop short with Ibn Rushd. It continued to generate new directions in jurisprudence, sociology, economics, and more, and has hybridized in complex ways with European-derived knowledges (e.g. Alatas 2014).

Nor is Islamic knowledge the only alternative universalism. Knowledge growing out of Indian experience and tradition, including perspectives formulated by Gandhi, has also been proposed as an alternative to the mainstream economy of knowledge (e.g. Lal 2002).

Third, *Southern theory*, i.e. the frameworks of knowledge generated in the colonial encounter itself, and from the experience of colonial and postcolonial societies. The phrase 'Southern theory' emphasises that, contrary to what is assumed in the mainstream, the colonized and postcolonial world has been rich in theoretical thinking. Our societies have constantly produced concepts,

analyses and innovative ideas - though often in forms not well recognized by mainstream institutions.

A key contemporary form of Southern theory is the distinctive knowledge projects that use institutions and tools of the mainstream economy but break free of Northern hegemony in defining intellectual agendas. Famous examples are the CEPAL school of development economics launched by Raúl Prebisch and Celso Furtado, and the *Subaltern Studies* project in history launched by Ranajit Guha. The extraordinary research on land, environment and economy by Bina Agarwal and other Indian feminists is a more recent example. There are many other cases where groups of knowledge workers in the South have created distinctive research agendas, schools of thought, and curriculum change (for a Brazilian example see Maia 2011).

When we recognize this wealth of knowledge formations and projects, we must re-think the received histories of knowledge. My discipline of sociology, for instance, created a legendary narrative of 'classical sociology' highlighting Weber and Durkheim. If we treat their younger contemporary Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's book *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) as the classic of world sociology it really is, we are obliged to consider different issues: the role of colonizing violence in shaping societies, the significance of land in social structure, and the patterns of non-recognition that have shaped sociology.

Relativism, power and mutual learning

Re-thinking the history of knowledge is important for the question of relativism. We do not face a simple choice of Western vs African, universal vs specific, single vs multiple, or colonial vs indigenous. Knowledge systems across the world have for many generations been interweaving. Indeed I would rather drop the term 'knowledge system', which too easily implies a static, homogeneous and tightly-bounded thing – the picture painted by old-style ethnography. Speaking instead of knowledge formations and knowledge economies highlights historical change and interaction.¹

We know from long social struggles how knowledge formations have been shaped by social power. Workers' movements had to contest bourgeois intellectual frameworks as well as political power. The women's movement had to contest patriarchal control of knowledge, challenging men's near-monopoly of intellectual authority and capacity to define what counts as knowledge. It is hardly surprising that colonial power too has had profound effects on the making of knowledge.

¹ By 'knowledge formation' I mean a distinctive ensemble of information, conceptualisation and representation, which might also be called an 'episteme'. The term 'knowledge economy' emphasises the work of production and circulation that generates a knowledge formation, and highlights the workforce and institutions involved.

To recognize that knowledge formations are shaped by social power is not to say they can be *reduced* to social power. That is the direction in which some post-structuralist discussion of power/knowledge has gone; and some (though not all) decolonial critique. I don't find that view convincing; it misses the element of *encounter* in the making of knowledge.

Researchers in both the natural and the human sciences encounter a world that resists their own thought, that pushes back. That's why we set up those gravity-wave experiments, send out those geological excursions, haul out the clip-board and do those interviews. When I, as a sociologist, conduct an interview it is precisely for the purpose of hearing something I don't already know – and will then have to work on, before I really understand. This is where the difficult search for truth occurs, in encounters where we can be shown to be wrong, where our ideas are deliberately put at risk – and thus enabled to develop.

We often exaggerate the coherence of the 'knowledge system' shaped by dominant powers. The mainstream economy of knowledge *is* truly powerful, and getting more so as it gets integrated with the corporate economy. But coherence, or consistent rationality, doesn't necessarily follow.

This is shown by the deep turbulence about the foundations of European knowledge. I take very seriously the questioning by philosophers such as Husserl, Lukács and Heidegger, more recently Derrida, Lyotard and Harding. To give just one example, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) was an imaginative attempt to assess the state of knowledge in the global metropole, which concluded that its organizing principles or 'grand narratives' have been losing their grip.

The recent managerial turn in university systems worldwide – the online templates, auditing, benchmarking, ranking, quantification of output, and corporate strategic planning that we all know and love – looks uncommonly like an attempt to impose control on a knowledge formation that is losing coherence. But the effect is to increase the irrationality of the institutions (listen to what both academic and non-academic staff say about these mechanisms), and to narrow, not enrich, the domain of knowledge.

Against the monolithic view presupposed by neoliberal management, I would argue for a generously plural approach to knowledge. We should value our uncertainties, recognize that our data can always be examined in different ways, and celebrate the wealth of ideas, concepts and methods in the world. At the same time I would argue against a 'mosaic' epistemology, the view that the world of knowledge consists of separate systems that sit in static splendour like different-coloured tiles in a mosaic. What matters most in the development of knowledge is encounter and interaction – encounter with the world, encounter with ideas, and interaction (cooperation, debate, communication) among knowledge workers.

If we take such a view, then we need not be trapped in a relativist/absolutist standoff. Rather, we can examine the conditions for *mutual learning*. We need to consider how different frameworks, traditions and knowledge projects can

inform each other, how mutual critique becomes possible, how multiple voices can be heard, and how new perspectives emerge from mutual learning.

These are educational issues (and I'm pleased to note that 2016 is the hundredth anniversary not only of Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* but also of Dewey's *Democracy and Education*). They are educational issues that universities should be good at, but often are not. They concern the relationship between democracy and knowledge; and universities, by and large, have not been democratic institutions.

The role of universities

Thinking about curriculum thus requires us to think about the social role of universities. One of their major tasks has always been to train young people for knowledge-based professions. Early European universities taught clerks and lawyers in Latin for the church and the state. The role has grown in the modern information economy, with English instead of Latin, and access to jobs in the global corporate economy the lure. University student bodies have long been sites of social privilege, reflecting hierarchies of race, class and gender. Universities no longer formally exclude on the basis of gender or race, but inequalities in school systems and family money are still main determinants of entry. University education has had the effect, extremely uncomfortable from a democratic point of view, of re-creating privilege from generation to generation – though it has also been a path of social mobility for some.

Postcolonial universities have generally performed the professional-training role, and therefore have a curriculum requirement for the occupational skills and background knowledge needed by lawyers, engineers, doctors, agronomists and teachers. There are critics who think that universities, which are costly institutions, have grown too big at the expense of technical colleges. Re-thinking university curricula certainly means thinking about social access to education in a situation of limited resources, as well as the balance between forms of education.

The key argument for postcolonial investment in universities is their role in the creation of knowledge – that is to say, their research capacity. This became a leading feature of European universities only in the later 19th century, but is now the main determinant of universities' prestige. Given developing states' concern for economic growth, having a share in the production of organized knowledge, and being able to steer some of that production, may be worth paying for.

That seems to be the view taken by the post-Mao rulers of China, who mobilized the resources to build up a large university system - the most dramatic recent change in the world university scene. Most of its curriculum and research have followed US models; this growth was *not* driven by alternative knowledge ideas! The difference is more in the weight given to different fields of knowledge. The Chinese regime invested heavily in technoscience with economic and military payoff, and underplayed social science.

Wider in its impact, though not as dramatic, is the gradual commercialization of the world's universities. This is an aspect of global neoliberalism, in which the profit-making corporation became the model for all organizational life. For universities, the effects include increasing dependence on fees; an international traffic in fee-paying students; increasing pressure to teach and research for short-term profit; the rise of managerial control within universities; casualization and outsourcing of university workforces; and the high-stakes auditing and ranking systems.

These changes create strong pressures on the curriculum. They tend to marginalize areas of knowledge that can't easily be commodified (including the humanities, critical social analysis, and pure science). And they tend to standardize curricula internationally on the model of elite universities in the USA. Any other choice will weaken a university's position in the fee-paying-student market and in international league-table rankings. It is also relevant that a pre-digested curriculum, using globally-standardized textbooks, is easier to implement for a time-poor, casualized teaching workforce. Online courses, such as MOOCs, provide models.

These are major trends in higher education; but once more, we must recognize there are counter-currents. Universities have also been centres of progressive thought, especially in times when other sites of dissent didn't exist or were closed down. Universities have, erratically but with real effect, supported a public culture of debate and investigation. They have been places where some dialogue was usually possible.

It was not to gain individual privilege that anti-colonial movements, workers' movements and women's movements fought for access to university education for the social groups who had historically been excluded. It was to gain a share of an important collective resource. These movements saw universities as key sites where cultural change occurred and a society's collective imagination could be expanded – where a more democratic vision of the world could take shape. That vision is important for the discussion of decolonizing knowledge.

Making and re-making intellectual culture

Universities' bread-and-butter work involves teaching a society's future intellectually-trained workforce. Universities also have the task of producing much of the knowledge that workforce will use. And they have the task of producing their own future workforce – training researchers, higher education teachers, and the professional non-academic staff whom universities also need. (This is where the neoliberal turn has begun to undermine the whole institution, as casualization reaches the point where the future intellectual workforce is disrupted.)

In considering the future of universities, then, a crucial question is the competencies and knowledges that the next generation of intellectually-trained workers will need. We can be sure that what is needed will expand, not contract, in the future. Contrary to some of the early theorising about 'globalization', the

world is not becoming a homogenized single culture. It is becoming more unequal and more complex, with new kinds of power centres, new patterns of exploitation, and unforeseen movements ranging from the Zapatistas to K-pop to ISIS. Comaroff and Comaroff, in *Theory from the South* (2012), argue that contemporary change in Africa is showing the global North some of the North's own future. I'm sure they are right, and the point applies in other parts of the postcolonial world too.

If the competencies and knowledges needed in the future are becoming more complex, then the task of university staff and students is becoming harder, not easier. Being competent in multiple forms of knowledge, and navigating among them, is a tougher proposition than mastering a single episteme. There is serious work here for educationists and philosophers – disciplines not much valued by neoliberal regimes, but very important for the future of universities.

Given these difficulties, why would universities try to decolonize knowledge at all? In my view there are four main reasons, related to the different knowledge formations described earlier.

The first is practical need. On the argument just made, our students will need a wider range of competencies to engage with the world they are moving into. Among them are competence in alternative universalisms and other knowledge formations that already exist in the world. The second is a question of justice. Imperial power and the global economy of knowledge marginalized, and often disrupted, knowledge formations among colonized peoples, helping to create the inequalities of the contemporary world. Revaluing and resourcing indigenous knowledges and alternative universalisms is a constructive response.

The third reason is prudential. All is not well with the mainstream. Its deep foundations are uncertain. Its imbalances have produced the technology underlying nuclear weapons and global warming but not the wisdom to prevent them. And now neoliberalism narrows its scope and undermines its reproduction. The mainstream episteme has great value, we cannot discard it; but we need to re-think it, and other knowledge formations provide standpoints for doing so. The fourth reason is optimistic. The glory of the modern university is its capacity to grow knowledge and deepen understanding. The mainstream economy of knowledge sharply limits this by concentrating authority and recognition in the metropole. Dismantling this limit and engaging the full range of Southern knowledge projects increases the wealth of knowledge at our disposal.

Major curriculum reform can hardly be achieved without greater democratisation of the university as an institution, and its relation to the wider society. Deep problems about knowledge formations are not going to be solved by managerial authority - still less by the showy, under-funded feel-good programmes that have become a normal managerial response to equity issues in my country. These problems require sustained discussion and experimentation among broad groups of staff and students, who themselves have power to make things happen on the ground, who can build courses and programmes.

This kind of change will take different forms in different regions, universities, and disciplines. I don't think there will ever be a one-size-fits-all solution. But there will be many opportunities to learn from experience and share ideas. At the end of this paper is a list of some resources, a small sample of what can be found.

I'll conclude with an example of what decolonizing change means for an individual discipline: my own field, sociology. This has existed as a university teaching discipline for about 120 years. It took its modern form in the global metropole, and spread internationally in two waves, first in the late colonial period, and then during the Cold War. Its current structure closely follows Hountondji's general description: a global centre in the USA, secondarily in western Europe; almost all influential theory coming from the metropole; all prestigious journals published and edited in the metropole; sociology in the periphery supplying data but intellectually dependent on the metropole; and careers in the periphery strongly affected by training and recognition in the metropole.

In the last two decades there has been increasing criticism of this situation and growing attempts to decolonize the discipline. So far, these efforts address five key issues:

1. Re-examining the discipline's understanding of itself, de-mythologising its history, and bringing to light the global-North perspectives embedded in leading theories, methodologies and forms of publication.

2. Recovering and circulating major examples of sociological thought from beyond the metropole, both historical and contemporary, thus multiplying theoretical resources and challenging familiar boundaries of the discipline.

3. Re-making textbooks and undergraduate course plans to include Southern perspectives and a much greater diversity of content. (This has gone slowly; major publishers still focus on Northern markets.)

4. Reforming the institutional framework of the discipline, e.g. reducing Northern hegemony in conferences and associations, building South/South links and collaborations, attempting to change the practices of journals.

5. Developing new research agendas based on postcolonial perspectives and social needs across the global South, a process now gradually moving through sub-disciplines (criminology, sociology of education, urban sociology, etc.); including, reflexively, research on the global economy of knowledge itself.

I'm not offering sociology as a shining model – it was slower to engage with the colonality of knowledge than the humanities were – simply as one example of what is involved in change at the level of a university discipline. Other disciplines will undoubtedly find other paths. But there will be common ground, and possibilities for mutual learning between disciplines.

I hope your conversations go well. There are tough intellectual problems here, as well as tough social issues. You can nevertheless be sure that the progress

you make will be valued in other countries, and will help to shape a more democratic and intellectually productive future for the world's universities.

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