

Decolonising academia

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Decolonise Academia

- March-April 2015, Rhodes Must Fall protests in South Africa
- Calls to 'Decolonise the Curriculum' and 'Decolonise Education'
- Spread to UK and other countries, including Norway
- What does it mean, and what does it have to do with us here?

Today's class

- Exercise: do you think decolonial perspectives are relevant for your research?
- A very brief history of European science and ideas in the age of 'Enlightenment' and colonialism
 - Exercise: consider the colonial origins of your own discipline
- What's the problem?
- Colonial legacies in publishing
 - Exercises: citations in your work
- What might decolonisation of knowledge production look like?
 - Discussion: do we have a responsibility to engage the colonality of knowledge? Is this part of academic citizenship?

First impressions

- Before we start, a quick round of first impressions:
- Short individual written reflection followed by class discussion:
- Is the connection between academia and colonialism something you have thought about before? Is your gut reaction that decolonial perspectives are relevant to your own research? How?
- A quick disclaimer: as a white, Western woman, I can only describe the processes of colonisation from my privileged perspective, nor do I have familiarity with indigenous knowledge systems. The following is thus inevitably a limited account. I recommend that you seek out other accounts, such as the ones provided in your readings for today, in my final slide and in Elisabeth's class tomorrow

Enlightenment and colonialism

- The era of Enlightenment during which many academic disciplines were formalised coincided with colonialism. This was not, in fact, a coincidence
- Western science and knowledge production were intimately tied up with the imperial enterprise, both enabling it and benefitting from it
 - European scientists accompanied journeys of 'exploration' and brought back thousands of specimens of plants, animals, even people
 - These were named and categorised according to newly developing systems
 - They were exhibited in new museums and colonial exhibitions, to entertain and educate the public and teach them about the 'exotic' world they governed

Epistemicide

- At the same time, a concerted effort was made to eradicate indigenous knowledges, to deny local historical achievements and impose European knowledge systems and languages. E.g.:
 - Destruction of Maya writing
 - Repression of local languages and cultures
 - Assimilation policy in settler societies: destruction of language and culture (Simpson)
 - Destruction of (connection to) the land: source of knowledge and learning
- Macaulay's minute on Indian Education, 1835:
 - 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. ... The question now before us is simply whether, when it is in our power to teach English, we shall teach languages in which, by universal confession, there are no books on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own' 'We must at present do our best to form a class...Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.'

Science in the service of colonialism

- In turn, Western sciences enabled the domination of the world:
 - Medicine developed treatments for tropical diseases so that colonisers could survive in the colonies
 - Technological advances like the telegraph, railways, steamboats, etc. enabled long-distance communication and transportation of settlers, soldiers and raw materials
 - These advances were promoted as being for the benefit of the colonised
 - Anthropology and linguistics developed ways of 'knowing the native' which made it easier to rule
 - Philosophy, history and biology explained the domination of other peoples as 'natural', the result of the inherent superiority of the 'race'
 - Literary studies in the colonisers' language were formalised through the development of curricula for the colonised, then imported back home

Categories of thought

- In the colonial encounter, Western science and philosophy developed categories of thought that are still with us today
- These categories provided a way to organise and hierarchise the world, and to legitimise the domination and enslavement of other people
- These include:
 - Race
 - Nation
 - Hierarchies and binary oppositions putting Europe at the top: savage/civilised, traditional/modern, despotic/democratic
 - Universality
 - Modernity
 - Rationality

Incomplete decolonisation

- In the decades after the Second World War, the global empires were dissolved, sometimes peacefully, often through bloody conflicts
- This means that most countries are today independent in the sense of formally governing their own affairs
- Yet it is a key idea of decolonial thought that the process of actual decolonisation is not yet complete
- Settler colonialism continues, and neo-colonialism or the colonality of power mean that the former colonial powers still dominate world affairs, continue to extract resources from formerly colonised areas and continue to dictate standards of knowledge production
- Categories emerging in colonialism ('race', 'nation', 'rationality' etc.) still govern how people in and outside the 'West' think. Colonisation of the mind/cognitive empire (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ndlovu-Gatsheni)

Exercise: the colonial origins of your discipline

- In groups, discuss these questions:
- Reflect on the history of your own discipline
 - What do you know about the origins of the discipline? Is it entangled with the history of colonialism?
 - How does the discipline conventionally tell its own history? Are any colonial legacies recognised and discussed?
 - If you do not know: does that unawareness tell you anything? Do you imagine that there might be a colonial history that you are unaware of, or not? How would you find out? Does your field borrow from neighbouring fields which have a proven colonial history (like philosophy, anthropology, archaeology, economy, biology, geography, literary studies)?

What's the problem?

- Ok, so academia has a colonial history. And so what, you might ask. It's all in the past, isn't it?
- What do you think are the legacies of this history and how might they be problematic?
 - Has resulted in the domination of one knowledge system (the Western) over all others
 - Categories of thought developed under colonialism still used relatively unthinkingly – seen as product of Enlightenment, not oppression
 - Dominance of European languages, especially English
 - Enduring inequalities in funding for universities as well as what regions are perceived as delivering excellent research, unequal research collaborations
 - University and museum collections still hold millions of items (plants, animals, human remains, artworks) gathered during colonialism
 - Has resulted in inequalities that are perpetuated if not addressed (race, class)
 - Examining the world from a limited perspective limits what we can know
 - The intellectual history affects the categories we use to think, even if we are not aware of it – if not addressed, we perpetuate colonial structures

Colonial legacies in publishing

- After decolonisation, links and inequalities between the scientific output of former colonising and colonised countries remain
- Science is often done in the language of the former coloniser
- Research collaborations often involve those in the least developed countries carrying out fieldwork in their own countries while those in the industrialised countries do the analytical work, not always including their collaborators as co-authors (Dahbouh-Guebas et al.)
- Formerly colonised people still seen as a source of raw data not producers of refined analysis (Roy)
- Particular writing style and structuring devices are expected if one wants to be published in the journals that are cited and give the prestige needed to secure a permanent job (Trahar et al.)

Bibliodiversity under pressure

- Essential to ensure publication on diverse topics from diverse perspectives, languages and knowledge systems
- However, Shearer and Becerrill-García argue, this is harmed by several processes
 - Publishing is increasingly dominated by five big corporations
 - Increasing prices of academic journals make it difficult for university libraries in lower-income countries to afford subscriptions
 - Journals are under pressure to increase citations, and thus focus on ‘hot’ topics of international interest, written in English (to the detriment of the locally relevant)
 - Move to Open Access is often ‘pay to publish’ with several thousand Euro charges
 - ‘scholarly communications today functions in a colonized manner, compelling researchers around the world to undertake research of importance to the global North, rather than address the issues that are most relevant in their own regional and local contexts.’ (p. 3)
 - As an alternative, they describe Latin America’s system of academy-owned, open access, non-profit publishing

Citation as conscientious engagement

- Mott and Cockayne criticise the tendency of 'successful' citation practices to reinforce existing power structures
- In the desire to be part of an intimate community of scholars and to be recognised as knowledgeable, authors may repeat what is familiar, even if that is built on a history of oppression and exclusion
- As they note, there is often an absence of critical engagement with the work cited, a name-dropping exercise, 'citing without sighting', as well as a screening out of certain voices
- They propose that citation can instead be used as a 'conscientious engagement' with knowledge produced also by people who don't conform to the dominant image of a knowledge producer, whether because they are non-white, queer, female, or not in academic positions
- Such 'failed' citation may meet resistance from reviewers/editors, but may offer a mode of resistance to the unthinking reproduction of existing power structures

Exercise: your own citations

- In your groups, discuss what it might entail to include marginalised perspectives in your own research
- You can take your point of departure in something you are currently writing and maybe have a critical look at your bibliography
- Where and how would you search to find other knowledge producers?
- How might it contribute to your research?

What decolonising the university entails

- As Prinyavada Gopal notes, 'decolonising the university' may mean a lot of different things:
 - Diversifying curricula and hiring practices
 - Reckoning with Europe's own constitution through empire, including the material benefits it has reaped, the self-conception of 'West' as opposite 'the Rest', and the cultural influence on European thought from elsewhere ('an intellectual audit', 885)
 - Engaging with the legacies of colonialism in and outside of Europe
 - 'Re-examining the definition of knowledge itself – including what and how we come to know' (880). Abandoning the assumption of Europe as universal
 - Acknowledging the formative influence of colonialism on the university and the destruction by colonialism of non-Western knowledge
 - Must be an ongoing process, shouldn't be soothing, no one-size-fits-all

Table 1. The 'Ten-Ds' of the decolonial turn.

Decolonial turn	Elaboration
1. Decanonisation	Shifting from Eurocentric scaffold of knowledge to African and other subjugated knowledges
2. Deimperialisation	Changing the modern power structures which anchor and enable universalisation of European knowledge
3. Depatriachisation	Undoing the androcentrism in knowledge generation and opening up to feminist, queer and womanist scholarship
4. Deracialisation	Removing the colour-line and abyssal thinking in knowledge
5. Dedisciplining	Liberating knowledge from disciplinary empires and academic tribes
6. Deprovincialisation	(Re)placing Africa into the centre of knowledge and releasing it from marginality and peripherality
7. Debourgeoisement	Liberating knowledge from dominant white minority male elite intellectuals and opening it up to knowledge from African intellectuals, peasants, workers, and women
8. Decorporatisation	Confronting market invasion and colonisation of universities and challenging commercialisation and commodification of knowledge and education.
9. Democratisation	Opening up to mosaic epistemology and ecologies of knowledges
10. Dehierarchisation	Decentering hierarchies of thought and knowledge

Table by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'The cognitive empire', 2021

Disobedience

- Murrey and Daley describe a 'disobedient' approach of 'unlearning'
- They clearly situate themselves:
 - Their intellectual interlocutors (stressing humility)
 - Their politics (rejecting 'ivory tower')
 - Their institution (exposing imperial complicity of Oxford, 'race-making institution', pondering danger of being appropriated by uni)
 - Their bodies and circumstances (not automatically recognised as experts)
- They challenge the idea of the 'expert' and suggest that artists and activists have often theorised and analysed the issues they are interested in better than academics

What might decolonisation of knowledge production look like?

- Broadening ideas of what knowledge and knowers look like
- Material changes, like development of non-profit publishing infrastructures or lowering of university fees
- Mental changes, like challenging colonial categories of thought
- Practical changes, like incorporating other writers in curriculum, more conscientious citation practices, including other writing styles, languages and topics in journals
- Many connect decolonisation of academia to a wider decolonisation effort, e.g. to suggest that scholars must also work towards the dismantlement of settler societies (Tuck and Yang, Simpson)

What might decolonisation of knowledge production look like?

- Attention to and efforts to change
 - What students/scholars read: working towards more representative curricula and citation practices
 - How they read: awareness of colonial history of the discipline, incorporation of other perspectives
 - Who they are: hiring practices and breaking down of barriers for non-Western scholars

Discussion

- Do we have a responsibility as professional knowledge producers to engage the colonial history and enduring legacies of colonialism? Is this part of academic citizenship?
- If so, how should such an engagement manifest itself?
 - Learning about the colonial history of one's field?
 - Reflecting on one's own gaze and position?
 - Actively including work by non-Western authors?
 - Learning about (and incorporating?) indigenous knowledge in one's research?
 - Saying no to privileges?
 - Working (also outside academia) to end coloniality?
 - Disobedience?

Further reading

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