



The problem with decolonisation: entanglements in the politics of knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In the heat of the decolonisation struggles of the 2000s, there has been little space or tolerance for conceptual criticism of this important moment in global history. Using the South African case, this article outlines some of the dilemmas of decolonisation as a concept and method for dealing with legacy knowledge in the aftermath of colonialism and apartheid. The status of whites as citizens rather than colonials, the lack of determination of meanings of decolonisation within public universities, and the defanging of a potentially radical concept are among the concerns raised in this critical work on the uptake of the idea in post-apartheid society. What this criticism points to is the need for a theory of institutions when dealing with radical curriculum change rather than a politics that relies so much on the rhetorical, the symbolic and the performative in the demand for decolonisation.

Keywords—Decolonisation, Africanisation, institutional curriculum, African indigenous knowledge, curriculum theory, entanglements.

INTRODUCTION

Let me start by stating the obvious. The role of the social scientist especially in times of national (or global) crisis is to be sceptical of new words or terms as they emerge in public discourse. For example, it took South Africans some time to realise that phrases such as ‘white monopoly capital’ or ‘radical economic transformation’ were in fact propagated by a British public relations firm *Bell Pottinger* as part of an elaborate ruse to deflect from state capture and corruption under then President Jacob Zuma (Segal 2018).

Until that point, those words circulated relatively free of scrutiny in the public discourse and even made it into the text of the 2017 State of the Nation Address by a President who would eventually find himself in prison. (The specific trigger for Zuma's arrest was his refusal to give evidence in a trial about corruption during his years in power.) President Zuma concluded that rousing address with the call to 'Let us unite in driving radical economic transformation for the good of our country' (Zuma 2017).

The same rhetorical flourish happened when 'decolonisation' and later, its more sophisticated form, 'decoloniality', appeared out of nowhere on South African university campuses.

Decolonisation is broadly understood as referring to historical processes of ending colonisation and its aftermaths such as expressed in the educational curriculum. Decoloniality, on the other hand, represents a challenge to Western scientific rationality in favour of one that ostensibly embraces alternative and indeed multiple frameworks of knowledge and authority.

THE EMERGENCE OF DECOLONISATION LANGUAGE IN AN UNFAMILIAR CONTEXT

The sudden advent of decolonisation took place around the time (April 2015) that protesting students under the banner of the hashtag #RhodesMustFall successfully campaigned to bring down the massive bronze statue of the imperialist Cecil John Rhodes on the upper campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT). In the north of the country, a parallel moment called #FeesMustFall started later that year (October 2015) on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand and the two currents would eventually merge around a demand for 'a free, decolonised education'.

The strange thing about the sudden emergence of the language of decolonisation in South Africa is that it was never part of the language of struggle over more than three centuries. South Africans talked about the liberation struggle or the anti-apartheid struggle or the armed struggle but the language of colony or colonial subjects or decolonisation hardly featured at all – except once. There was a moment in the early 1950s when the South African Communist Party proposed the idea of South Africa as representing 'colonialism of a special type' (or internal colonialism) but that notion did not gain much traction in the broader national struggle for liberation (Everatt 1992). If anything, it was the Boers in their struggle against the British Empire around the end of the 19th century who were more likely to reference externally the language of imperialism.

Why then did decolonisation surface in the South African public discourse, starting on university campuses, in the mid 2000s? A student interviewed for a book project on the subject of the decolonisation of knowledge (Jansen & Walters 2022) offered this eloquent explanation: 'So we realised that transformation is not enough. Something else must now be pumped in, which is why ... decolonisation became the new theme.' Another student made a similar

point: 'The university does not want to use "decolonisation." They insist on using "transformation." Because they understand that this is an ideological battle that we are winning.'

In other words, decolonisation emerged as a political keyword in the language of student protests to replace what had been the official reference to change in the post-apartheid period: transformation. From the students' point of view, transformation had failed to deeply transform campuses and communities; something more radical was needed and that explains how decolonisation came to banner student protests in the period 2015–2017. This opportunistic claim over a complex and commanding terminology explains both the currency and the curtailments of decolonisation in the heat of struggle.

THE ACADEMIC RECEPTION OF DECOLONISATION

The political currency of decolonisation in this period of uprising meant that there was little to no challenge to the essential meanings of the term or its social valency in a constitutional democracy such as South Africa. What were some of the curtailments of decolonisation that required a deep and sustained engagement in and beyond the South African case?

To begin with, South Africa entered the decolonisation debates fairly late in the African liberation calendar. Those debates had already been richly conceptualised in the anti-colonial struggle writings (Frantz Fanon in Algeria, for example) and in postcolonial literature studies (Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya, as a more recent example).

Given the lack of an intellectual and political tradition of decolonisation on South African soil, it was not surprising that when the students raised this referential flag it landed with a thud in the academy: there were no national literatures on the subject. That harsh reality also explains why the most eloquent advocates of decolonisation on South African university campuses were scholars whose national and intellectual roots lay elsewhere. Among such academics who provided intellectual leadership in the decolonisation protests were Sarah Chiumbe (Media Studies, University of Johannesburg), Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (History, then at the University of South Africa), Innocent Pikirayi (Archaeology, University of Pretoria) and Achille Mbembe (Philosophy, University of the Witwatersrand).

The intellectual vacuum in the national corpus on decolonisation also meant that South African universities were overly reliant on international scholars to bring in their particular meanings of the term from varied contexts. Overnight, the Latin American theorists of decoloniality (Walter D. Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, for example) were the most popular figures on national campuses – in person and/or on reading lists – and a whole new political vocabulary started to enter activist discourses, such as coloniality, epistemological suicide and epistemic disobedience.

Furthermore, in the absence of local literatures, there was a considerable amount of recovery of decades-old continental literatures from Frantz Fanon

in the north of the continent to Black Consciousness activist Steve Biko in the south, even though the latter's writings made scant reference to decolonisation. What mattered was that this combination of radical literatures offered a sharp edge to the student demands and aspirations again, with little unpacking of essential meanings.

A second problem with decolonisation lay in the context of application. Among the reasons for the late-bloomer status of decolonisation on South Africa's intellectual and political landscape was the profound ambivalence about the application of the term itself, given South Africa's particular modes of social transition from colonialism through segregation and then, formally, apartheid. South Africa had a classical settler-colonial regime in which the settlers were of significant numbers compared with, say, Zimbabwe or even Kenya – and they sheltered in place.

But it is more than that. In South African politics and society, the settlers were natives, full-blooded South Africans recognised as such in the country's Constitution and prefigured in these historic opening lines of the 1955 Freedom Charter of Mandela's African National Congress: 'We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white ...'

This was no accident. As Mahmood Mamdani (2020: 45) wrote in a timely contribution to the debate on decolonisation:

South Africans attempted to decolonise, by breaking down the colonial distinction between settlers and natives and inviting them to participate in the same political community, with settlers reconfigured as immigrants.

None of these critical nuances in South African history and the politics of place were entertained on the frontlines of the battles for decolonisation on campuses. To be sure, the student movement drew necessary attention to South Africa's colonial history for until that point, the omnibus explanation for all the country's ills was apartheid. There was a strange ignorance and long silence about the history of colonial rule that preceded formal apartheid in the 20th century. Now there was a different problem: all problems in universities and the broader society were collapsed under the conceptual umbrella of decolonisation. Apartheid, in one rendition of the problem, was simply a late-historical expression of colonialism while the pre-colonial period continued to be ignored.

Needless to say, there were all kinds of problems with such a glib characterisation of the country's pasts. If decolonisation is the answer, what is the colonial project of the present? Are whites at this late stage in South Africa's democracy little more than colonial leftovers whose epistemological fingerprints are all over the curriculum? More pertinently for the sake of my thesis on the politics of knowledge: what is the colonial problem within the institutional curriculum? At this point things were starting to become fuzzy because of a careless use of the language of decolonisation without deeper reflection on what it might mean for the national context.

Inside universities, these indeterminate meanings for decolonisation were about to take an extraordinary direction. In the absence of any conceptual guide for what decolonisation could mean across the disciplines, from actuarial science and anthropology to mechanical engineering and the performing arts, what would academics actually do in their daily curriculum practice?

We were fascinated by what could happen in the curriculum and so we designed a study which involved interviews with more than 200 academic teachers in the 10 universities which were among the more active of the 26 public institutions in responding to the political pressure for decolonisation.

In short, academics made up their own meanings for decolonisation at the personal and departmental levels. That is, without concrete guidance on the conceptual contours of a potentially radical term, academics interpreted decolonisation within the range of their intellectual and ideological comfort zones. Here are a few interpretations of decolonisation in curriculum practice that emerged from the study.

For some academics, to do decolonisation was to engage in *educational remediation*. That is, putting aside more resources (money, time, tutors) that enabled disadvantaged (read black) students to 'catch up' with the knowledge required to successfully pass the requirements for the discipline or degree. In South Africa, this used to be called 'academic development' and still exists in various iterations across the public universities. Remediation is certainly not radical; it has in fact over the years been criticised for casting black students in a deficit mode from which position they needed salvation. But that does not matter. For a sizeable group of respondents across the sampled universities, getting disadvantaged students over the academic finishing line was one way in which to 'decolonise' the curriculum.

To others, decolonisation was simply *good pedagogy*. By refining modes of teaching and making the subject more accessible and meaningful to students, academics in this group believed they were actually practicing decolonisation. More than one academic mentioned more flexible scheduling hours so that students could finish in time to catch public transport home. Others referred to the creative uses of new technologies to make complex subjects plain. And so on. Clearly there is a case to be made for good pedagogy. That this could so easily be linked to the radical concept of decolonisation is not so clear.

Then there were those who in the conceptual vacuum left open by the absence of steering concepts took decolonisation to mean giving attention to *African indigeneity* broadly and indigenous knowledge more specifically. This is a seductive appeal in contexts such as Canada or New Zealand or the USA where indigenous peoples and their knowledge have long been suppressed; while this is also true for South Africa, it has a potentially dangerous twist when it comes to the politics of knowledge.

There emerged from the decolonisation fray a striking ideological convergence between white Afrikaans' conceptions of indigeneity and those of black African activists especially those of a Pan African persuasion. Both were

concerned with the recognition of an indigenous African identity in the curriculum; that is, the essential African. How did this happen?

Apartheid was, if nothing else, an attempt to essentialise the African as a racial construct with certain essences that distinguished them from whites, Indians and Coloureds. As the foremost historian of Afrikaner pasts has written, it was the staple diet of Christian National Education ‘to imbue the black child with respect for the history, customs and culture of the ethnic community in which he or she was born’ (Giliomee 2003: 382).

Africans in turn were divided into 10 ethnic groups which were deemed to be socially, culturally and behaviourally distinctive with their own geographic ‘homelands’.

Decolonisation’s demand for the recognition of indigeneity did not exactly make a fetish of these distinctions of tribal or ethnic identity but nonetheless worked within the same ideological frame – that there was an essential African to be recovered from the suppression and neglect of indigenous identities under colonialism. Many white Afrikaans academics in our study immediately seized on this notion and captured it to fit within their own frameworks of meaning.

In this frame, the African was ‘indigenous’ with a peculiar knowledge of tradition, culture and self. This persona was typically a rural African isolated from modernity whose knowledge of local custom and practice needed to be recognised in the curriculum. It was the contrast with modernity that gave the primitive African a particular knowledge system such as evident in the following examples cited in our interviews alongside their correlate disciplines:

- Stokvels¹ (accountancy)
- Wheelbarrows (engineering)
- Homebrewing (biotechnology)
- Customary law (law)
- Traditional remedies (medicine)
- Superstitions (electricity)
- Beads and stones (mathematics)

The point is not that there are no knowledge functions or knowledge systems or knowledge experts (sangomas or traditional healers, for example) associated with such traditional practices. For those schooled in apartheid epistemologies, however, these were the *only* ways in which Africans were construed as knowledge creators. It was also immediately seized on for its contrasting values, something we elsewhere called the imperative of scientific measurement for purposes of racial distinction in the sciences (Walters and Jansen 2022). There are no urban or modern Africans in this construction of indigenous reality. And, importantly, whites have no indigenous knowledge like that of the distinctive, essentialised, tribalised African.

In our interviews with white Afrikaans academics, these examples were among those cited all the time as examples of what they included in the curriculum for

purposes of decolonisation. Once again, the indeterminate meanings of decolonisation allowed for academics to fill in any gaps in understanding with ideas and constructs that fit within their own ideological frames for making sense of themselves and others. Put differently, whatever radical intents came with the student push for decolonisation was deradicalised through these processes of sensemaking in academic departments and among academics themselves.

THE PROBLEM OF CENTRE-PERIPHERY ARGUMENTS IN
THE 21ST CENTURY

Beyond such political appropriation of radical ideas was another set of problems: the insistence of activist students and academics to construct the world in terms of the centre-periphery conceptualisations of the 1970s, such as dependency theory. In contemporary parlance, those binaries are described in terms of the Global North and the Global South – as if nothing changed.

A quick survey of leading universities in Africa would reveal those simple binaries largely unfit as conceptual schemas to describe the state of global knowledge production in the 21st century. In other words, African contributions to scientific knowledge has changed significantly in the past few decades alone. The old explanatory model for North–South relations in knowledge production is outdated in both its economic or epistemological forms. In economic terms, that model holds that Europe extracts raw materials from Africa, processes this in the North, and returns new products for Africans to consume.

In epistemological terms, so goes the old explanatory model, European scientists descend on Africa to make discoveries in the field (archaeologists, paleoanthropologists, anthropology, traditional medicine) and then publish that knowledge in the North which is returned as books and journal articles for African students and academics to consume. It is questionable whether this straightforward linear explanation for the production and use of knowledge was ever valid. It is certainly the kind of deterministic logic which reveals an underlying racism in its assumptions of human ideals and ambitions on the part of African scientists themselves.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic when African scientists identified a coronavirus variant which came to be known as Omicron and dutifully reported the discovery. The response from the West was not only a lack of acknowledgement but a crippling travel ban. When these African scientists further claimed that Omicron was infectious but that there were fewer hospitalisations, the initial reaction was doubt and dismissal leading to the charge of racism by South Africa's most accomplished medical researchers (Philling 2021; Meyer 2022).

The point for now is not about Western racism towards African science; it is rather to point to the fact that 'South Africa has frequently, albeit inconveniently, been interpreted as a site which actively contributes to the production of medical knowledge' (Mazzeo & White 2023: 13). These hard-won reputations for everything from medical innovation in heart transplant surgery to

leading discoveries in palaeoanthropology to Nobel laureates in literature and now the enormous capacity for genomic sequencing that helps the world surely makes a mockery of those old architectures of a simple North/South division.

None of this is to deny the enormous inequalities in research funding and institutional capacities between countries of the North and the South; that is incontestable as recently shown in the unequal distribution of vaccines across the world system (Mazzeo & White 2023). The point simply is that in the global production of knowledge, there is a growing and significant contribution to social and scientific knowledge from the South that speaks to new forms of cooperation that defy binary thinking.

One hint of such slow but significant shifts in the relations of knowledge production comes from the once strident critics of northern dominance in the scientific enterprise. Guy Neave (2016) speaks of ‘the inhuman untidiness of a binary world’ in a collection of papers critical of older schematic models of the global production of knowledge. Peggy Ochoa (2016: 221) observes that the antithetical pairs or binary opposites advanced by colonial discourses entraps thinking in ways that deny alternatives when the only images available are ‘the speaker with agency and the figure of the silent or silenced subaltern’.

Similarly, Paulin Hountondji (2006) concedes that the old centre-periphery models for describing the international production of knowledge were ‘exceedingly pessimistic’ and that ‘the first world features characteristics of scientific intellectual production, where extremely important work is done with resounding worldwide impact’. And global marginality is certainly not passivity, acknowledges one of the leading voices in studies of southern epistemologies, observing that North–South relations reveal ‘a pattern of agency ... not a position of powerlessness’ (Connell *et al.* 2017).

None of these concessions were made in the heat of struggle with the result that the contentions of decolonisation activists remain locked inside the hard binaries of the past (the West and the rest of us) with predictable demands: the re-centring of Africa at the heart of the curriculum thereby replacing the Eurocentric colonial curriculum.

THE PROBLEM WITH ‘AFRICANISATION’

This position, sometimes presented as the Africanisation of the curriculum, immediately faced several conceptual and empirical hurdles. To begin with, there was little evidence in our study of any academic teaching of a European-centred curriculum whether in the social sciences and humanities or the natural sciences and engineering. At the elementary level of African examples in the animal genetics curriculum or social problems of local communities in the sociology curriculum, there was abundant evidence of a South/African orientation.

At a conceptual level of course many of the dominant orientations towards theory and method have their roots in Western modes of thought. There are

two immediate explanations for that: the enduring power of those legacy ideas (which sociologist does not teach Max Weber and which botanist dare not cover Mendelian genetics?) and the relative absence of original and imaginative intellectual labour from the African continent in many of the disciplines. As two prominent scholars of applied linguistics recently argued, 'It is hard to imagine how decolonisation can occur easily in contexts of such limited knowledge production' (Pennycook & Makoni 2020).

To illustrate this point, I can only speak with some authority in reference to my own field of expertise, curriculum theory.

There have been successive waves of curriculum change across the African continent since the heady days of independence from colonial rule. In that period since the 1960s there has been no shortage of curriculum theorists who tried to make sense of the problem and politics of knowledge codified in subjects and syllabi for schools and universities. Yet I cannot list more than one or two who generated original, groundbreaking work which redefined the field and altered the ways in which we talk about knowledge, curriculum and change. One example is Richard Tabulawa's (2013) critical work on the failure of donor-sponsored, learner-centred pedagogies in Botswana and Ursula Hoadley's (2017) masterful account of the persistence of recitation pedagogies in South African classrooms.

Our most prominent curriculum theorists are more likely to (re)cite the works of Michael Apple and William Pinar in the USA or Michael Young and Basil Bernstein in the UK. The daring, the imagination, and the application required for generating curriculum theory from African soil is sorely lacking not because of any incapacity for ingenuity but because of the habits of imitation.

What are we left with? The reversion to social and curriculum criticism. We are good at that especially in a country such as South Africa where decades of being schooled in the resistance politics of the *anti-* meant that we did little to re-imagine the disciplines especially in the social sciences and education. Just like our songs of struggle are alliterative, our modes of reasoning remain repetitive.

This is where the deluge of Latin American theorists of decolonisation did us no favours for their primary mode of engagement with knowledge is an endless stream of critical repetition rather than the advancement of knowledge. Their modes of discourse are needlessly arcane and obtuse so that this small priesthood of scholars developed a self-referential language of the high humanities that was soaked up in South Africa with its penchant for the performative; terms such as epistemic disobedience fed right into the excitable language of resistance at the expense of the hard graft of producing new knowledge.

There is of course a rich tradition of curriculum criticism in the field but not one marked by new departures in conceptual innovation and educational design that deepen our understanding of the politics and problems of knowledge in theory and practice. On the African continent, there is little of the kind. That is why activists resuscitated old concepts from decades ago and

brought them forward into the 2000s such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's 'the decolonisation of the mind' all because the curriculum theory cupboard was bare.

In short, the push for the decentring of a European curriculum and the recentring of an African curriculum never happened not only because the notion itself was anachronistic but because the politics of knowledge production in an interconnected world had itself changed quite radically over time.

African scholarship in the decolonisation debates

There is a way of thinking oneself out of such circular thinking by examining close-up how knowledge is actually produced in North–South collaborations. Three brief examples, treated more fully elsewhere, must suffice (Jansen 2019: 64–70) as illustrative of the ways in which old centre-periphery models of knowledge production relations have been turned upside down.

The late Bongani Mayosi, once the head of the medical school at UCT and later its Dean of Health Sciences, was a world leader in studies on the relationship between poverty and cardiovascular diseases. He trained at Oxford University, UK, and did his work in Africa. Mayosi's problems were Africa-centred, in the language of decolonisation activists, his research questions, concepts and methods of discovery informed by and emergent from the African condition. Since the connection between poverty and heart disease is seldom made within wealthy countries, Mayosi's laboratories became a major attraction for medical scientists and their students from the North to learn from this world-rated scientist.

Quarraisha and Salim Abdool Karim are South Africa's power couple in the global study of infectious diseases. Trained at Columbia University in New York, they brought with them a powerful set of conceptual and methodological tools for the study of HIV/AIDS. Over time the Karims built a significant infrastructure for investigating infectious diseases such that when SARS-CoV-2 arrived on the shores of Southern Africa, the local programme was in a position to provide regional, continental and global leadership in the pandemic sciences. Because of the capacity and discovery built on experiences of studying HIV in vulnerable communities, their laboratories became training grounds for students from across the world.

Ian Phimister is one of the world's leading scholars of African mining histories. From his base at the University of the Free State, Phimister had built up a formidable group of postdoctoral fellows in African history who liaise with their mentor to produce scholarly books published by the leading academic publishers in the world. His intellectual insights were shaped by universities in Zambia and South Africa but also Oxford and the University of Sheffield. Because of Phimister's global expertise in his subject, young and established historians from the West come to study with his community of scholars in central South Africa.

These brief vignettes of four African scholars and their outstanding African research programmes demonstrate the interconnectedness of the scholarship

of North and South, African leadership of ideas from the vantage point of the continent, and the ‘dependency’ of scholars from outside Africa on their colleagues in Africa.

As already conceded, there can be no doubt that the deep transformation of inherited knowledge and knowledge systems from the colonial and apartheid pasts is variable and incomplete (Lange 2021). But the claim or assumption that nothing had changed and that Africa was simply an inert object of colonial manipulation is, of course, nonsense. This too was revealed in different ways in the course of our study of decolonisation-in-practice (Jansen & Walters 2022).

Long before the student protests of 2015, South Africa’s 26 public universities had decolonisation-type projects. We identified and documented the content of 10 prominent ones in fields such as polymer science, engineering, the visual arts, political science, media studies, archaeology, computer science and social psychology. These curricular initiatives shared the following five characteristics: they each presented a radical approach to their subject; they existed before the coming of the decolonisation moment on campuses; they seldom used the word ‘decolonisation’ to describe their approaches, methods, content or goals; they struggled for recognition from those working in the mainstream of the discipline; and they therefore often existed on the margins of the institution.

What these curriculum leaders recognised and appreciated were the radical goals of decolonisation. However, for reasons already explained, they did not necessarily assume that the radical dynamism of their knowledge projects fits comfortably under the conceptual or political canopy offered by decolonisation.

Some of these curriculum leaders wanted to be clear that they would not use decolonisation to describe their work. Others regarded decolonisation as only one aspect of a broader critical theory approach to their subject. This unease with the all-encompassing meanings assigned to decolonisation was certainly at odds with the rhetorical excesses of the campus activists.

That said, most of the gains made by these radical initiatives had to be struggled for. For example, the academic leaders advancing a core curriculum for engineering at Wits spoke of many years of agitation and persuasion to convince their faculties to come on board. These struggles speak to both the resident power of the established curriculum and the naivete of the decolonisation activists when it comes to unsettling knowledge inside universities that were established more than 50 or 100 years ago. This embeddedness of established knowledge within institutions is what we call the institutional curriculum.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CURRICULUM AND THE CHALLENGE OF DECOLONISATION

The *institutional curriculum* is the knowledge, beliefs, values and interests that define the curriculum across the disciplines and that remain solidly in place despite routine and regular changes to one or other aspect of the *disciplinary curriculum*, e.g. chemistry or teacher education. The notion of standards of

achievement, of assessment protocols, of regulatory review, of English as the teaching language, of top-down senate approvals of curriculum changes, the essential content of a discipline, the idea of course prerequisites – all those rules, regulations and routines establish the curriculum as an institution that does not yield to political pressure from any quarter.

The signs of institutional acquiescence were certainly there. University leaders promised to decolonise the curriculum. Senate committees sprung into urgent action. Senior managers were instructed to make resources available for speakers, symposia and sit-ins. Decolonisation reports were drafted, placed on institutional websites for commentary, finalised and presented to senates as the final word ‘for implementation’.

The problem is that the committee handover of these decolonisation reports two to three years later coincided with the full return to normal classes and the end of the political pressure for change. Faculty deans were told to implement, which they did not. The political pressure was off and in the meantime a new fad arrived on campuses: the fourth industrial revolution which called attention to such things as machine learning, artificial intelligence and digital technologies. As with decolonisation, the institutional attention shifted elsewhere and the radical moment was lost. There was little sense, among the decolonisation activists, about how to retain the momentum for change inside settled institutions.

What the decolonisation moment did not have, in other words, was a theory of change by which I mean a considered strategy for taking the significant momentum built and pushing for deep change within the knowledge structures that organise the modern university. There are those who argue that this was never the intent to begin with, that what students were flagging was a powerful symbolism of desired change in a society failed by the transformation of the Apartheid project. After all, symbolic policy has always been a principal rationale for policy announcements in the democratic era (Jansen 2002; Muller et al. 2016: 89).

Most higher education observers nevertheless believe that the ferocity of the attack on the settled curriculum by the decolonisation activists signalled a genuine commitment to turning inherited knowledge upside down. In especially the old English institutions such as the University of Cape Town, there was no shortage of curriculum deliberations under encouragement or pressure from the decolonisation moment. There were often long and bruising encounters between staff and students within academic departments, schools and faculties on many campuses. And yet, when asked the simple question at the end of our interviews with individuals and groups – five years later as to what extent the curriculum has changed since before the decolonisation moment – the answers were the same across the 10 institutions: not much or not at all.

Why the stasis? Setting aside the symbolism of the protest moment and the motivation offered by malcontents in the broader society, most of the staff and students on campuses were not agitating for change. If anything, the more than one million students who enter the gates of a South African university want a degree that leads to a job and that enables social mobility. Put

differently, they do not want the standards for engineering or accounting or medicine changed in ways that threaten the accreditation of these professions. All of these professions are regulated by protocols many of which were first laid down in the global North.

Consider in the context of this argument a relatively easy target for decolonisation – the English language. One could imagine a sharp focus of activism being to decolonise this most obvious of colonial legacies. English (and Afrikaans) were official languages to the detriment of the African languages recognised in the South African Constitution but neglected in educational practice. The odd university has an additional language option (isiZulu at the University of KwaZulu Natal being the most prominent case) and there is great celebration when ‘the first’ dissertation is submitted in an African language, such as isiXhosa (Daily Dispatch 2018). Beyond that, English is not only protected, it enjoys the status of the preferred and commonplace language in the institutional curriculum.

There has never been a protest over three decades of democracy against English as a language of instruction in the public universities. Rather, there has been a demand for the downscaling if not removal of Afrikaans as a parallel or dual language of instruction on campuses. This is partly fuelled by anti-Afrikaans sentiment in some activist quarters given the coercive history of the language under apartheid. The main reason, however, is that English is regarded as offering a neutral ground for teaching in all universities and especially those where there remains a lingering struggle to retain Afrikaans as language of instruction.

The problem this example brings to light about decolonisation is that there are constant negotiations and compromises made in academic and political calculations about which colonial legacies to accommodate and which to rail against. Chinua Achebe succinctly captured both the frustration and the reality of these difficult choices when he observed that:

The fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature leaves me more cold now than it did when I first spoke about it ... And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution of that problem (Achebe 1975).

In curriculum practice, there is content we will not and cannot change from continental philosophy (which is not African) to Newtonian mechanics. And yet, change happens.

“NOTHING HAS CHANGED”: THE BLIND SPOTS OF
DECOLONIAL ACTIVISM

Before and since the advent of political democracy in 1994, the higher education curriculum has changed in significant ways. Of course it started with its intellectual and ideological moorings in the education systems of Scotland and England (Jansen 2023). But there were major shifts over the decades under apartheid and especially with the massive qualifications reforms that

were visited on universities in the democratic era through a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) meant to bridge the divide between vocational and academic education. To be sure, those largely structural reforms left the knowledge question relatively untouched but there was change.

In the same way, individual academic leaders, research associations and professional societies have done much to insert deeply transformative elements into aspects of the disciplinary curriculum. A cursory glance at the social sciences and humanities curricula of the established English universities, such as the University of the Witwatersrand bear testimony to a broadly critical approach to the disciplines in everything from labour history in economics departments to radical women's writings in literature departments to critical psychology in social science departments.

Elsewhere, in more general analysis of curriculum change in schools and universities, I coined the term *knowledge regimes* to reflect the changing relationship between the state and knowledge at different moments in African history (Jansen 2019). The content of the precolonial curriculum influenced subsequent regimes in terms of things such as the authority or even authoritarian roles of elders in the education of children. The colonial curriculum inspired by a missionary ethos in early 20th century South Africa offered a paternalistic but nonetheless liberal ethos to the knowledge transaction in schools and university, which is why the apartheid authorities removed the authority for black education from the mission schools in the 1950s and created the backwardness reflected in a more appropriate tribalised curriculum for non-white South Africans.

All this changed when the first democratic government was installed in 1994 and several major changes to the school curriculum placed knowledge content under a completely different regime with ambitious goals for a learned-centred curriculum that in time was replaced by a highly scripted curriculum for teaching and learning (Shalem and De Clercq 2019). In other words, for schools and universities the knowledge codified in curriculum took on distinctive forms under different regimes making change, even radical change, a constant.

The question is, what did in fact change, where did the change happen, and what did not change at all – and why? This is where the hyperbole of decolonisation – *nothing has changed* – is both intellectually and politically unhelpful. The possibility of fine-grained analysis of what exactly needed to change and how this could be accomplished (the theory of change idea) was foreclosed in the heat of the decolonisation moment.

The tactics and strategy of the decolonisation moment had one ironic consequence, and that was its self-defeating stance with respect to African scholarship and its achievements in the past and in the present. By pivoting towards 'nothing has changed' or begrudgingly recognising small areas of change, it undermined the powerful sites where change has been pursued by courageous academics within conserving institutions. On the positive side, by drawing attention to colonialism and its aftermath, student activism made campuses and communities more conscious of that important historical event in the shaping of South African society and its institutions, including the curriculum.

What was lost in those heady days of decolonial activism was an opportunity to grapple seriously and deeply with what continues to be elided – how to navigate around the institutional barriers to radical curriculum change. One thing that stood out from our study is that the decolonisation moment completely underestimated the power of institutions to neuter radical ideas. Three examples illustrate this problem.

To begin with, the socialisation of academics is embedded in mainstream science, its content and training, its incentives and rewards. To ask academics to radically change their understandings of the discipline is something most cannot do and not a few will not do. To demand that a professor of nanotechnology or immunology ‘decolonise’ their discipline is to be met, most times, with bewilderment at best. Which raises the question: how do you change a curriculum without changing the curriculum makers? The short answer is, with great difficulty and with considerable patience on the part of those making the demands.

A second set of problems that did not enjoy much deliberation concerns the question of academic autonomy. In South Africa, academics enjoy significant autonomy in decisions around what to teach and how to teach it. Broader questions of institutional autonomy were an important arena of struggle against the encroachment of the apartheid state on everything from non-racial student admissions to staffing appointments. That tradition remains strongly entrenched in the country’s public universities. The pressing demand that academics decolonise their curricula was a non-starter from the outset even when some institutions foolishly linked such instruction to the performance appraisals of individual staff members.

A third very formidable problem for decolonisation is the authority of the regulatory system over the kinds of knowledge deemed worthy of accreditation. Our research focused on three powerful accreditation authorities in accounting, engineering and medicine and found that there was some anxiety at the height of the decolonisation protests about what this would mean for essential knowledge in these professional disciplines. Authorities were clear that there was to be no deviation from what the regulators had set in place in conjunction with international moderating bodies.

They need not have worried for even in the mainstream regulatory processes for new qualifications, an enterprising professor determined to introduce a new curriculum could wait for three to five years before official recognition is granted for the approval, registration and funding of a new qualification (Jansen and Walters 2022). Those are not the kinds of timelines that accord with the demands for radical change with respect to legacy knowledge as demanded by the decolonisation activists.

CONCLUSION

What lessons are to be learnt from the powerful decolonisation moment (2015–2017) in South African universities? First, there was no ‘decolonial

turn' as some prominent scholars pronounced even before the dust had settled to offer a clearer picture of the moment – its substantive content, institutional reach and curricular consequences (Badat 2017). That kind of prognostication was premature. The collapse of monuments such as that of Cecil John Rhodes on the UCT campus was the easy part; shaking the foundations of settled knowledge within staid institutions and the organised disciplines is a completely different matter.

This does not mean that 'nothing changed' as a result of the decolonisation moment; that is decidedly not the claim of this article. Thanks to student activism, there is now a consciousness of the language of decolonisation and of a periodisation in South African history long conflated with apartheid, namely, colonisation. There are many academics who became aware of the need for a more critical approach to curriculum even if their understanding of what that meant was often superficial (such as changing the Dollar and Euro signs in a commerce textbook to the Rand sign) and broadly reformist (such as improving methods of teaching) rather than radical in relation to the politics and problems of knowledge.

A second and important lesson is the limits of rhetorical, symbolic and performative politics so characteristic of official policymaking on the one hand, and social protest movements on the other hand (Habib 2019).

A third and final lesson has to be the caution required in the use of political language as an important signifier of who we are, where we come from, and what we envision as a more just and equitable society. The use of decolonisation as catch-all term for the complex ills of the not-so-new South Africa and, in this case, of its public universities, was not only a missed opportunity; it left in its wake a set of propositions about curriculum and colony that need to be redressed in the years to come.

What the foregoing has hopefully accomplished is to provide a curriculum theory lens on the entanglements of decolonisation inside universities as *institutions*. While the sound and fury of the decolonisation moment was visibly witnessed in the felling of Rhodes' statue, there is an invisible politics of knowledge that operates inside higher education institutions that works against radical curricular intent.

It is in getting smarter about the institutional politics of knowledge that a more radical meaning for decolonisation can be realised within the curriculum. A radical politics of decolonisation would therefore not only deal with 'what colonialism left undone' (Keet 2014) but engage with what the new global politics of knowledge production enables (research collaboration) and constrains (research financing) in pursuit of a more enduring change in the institutional curriculum.

NOTE

1. Stokvels are a savings scheme to which members contribute on a regular basis and after some time would receive a lump sum payment

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