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Neoliberalism and Coloniality are Two Sides of the Same Coin

Curiosity and Commitment. Perspectives on the Transformation of European Universities, ed. by Arantes et al., 2024, S. 171–182.
https://doi.org/10.25364/978390337430010

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Zusammenfassung

In Anlehnung an Vertreter:innen des Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality-Projekts schlage ich vor, dass Kritik am Neoliberalismus in der europäischen Hochschulbildung mit Fragen der Kolonialität zusammengedacht werden muss. Die Kapitel in diesem Sammelband konzentrieren sich zwar auf den europäischen Kontext, ihre Analysen sind jedoch von weitaus größerer Bedeutung. Der Neoliberalismus ist ein globaler Prozess, im Rahmen dessen Universitäten eine Schlüsselrolle in der „Globalisierung des Wissenskapitalismus" spielen. Gleichzeitig sind diese Universitäten auch durch einen epistemischen Kolonialismus gekennzeichnet, bei dem nur bestimmte Arten westlicher Epistemologien als „richtige wissenschaftliche" Wissensformen anerkannt und andere Wissensformen delegitimiert werden. Ich lege dar, wie es zu diesem Delegitimierungsprozess gekommen ist, indem ich Beispiele für das Schicksal verschiedener Wissensformen im Kontakt mit westlichen universalisierenden Erkenntnistheorien aufzeige. Aufgrund der engen Beziehung zwischen Kapitalismus und Kolonialität vertrete ich die Auffassung, dass es zur Lösung der durch die Neoliberalisierung der Universitäten aufgeworfenen Probleme notwendig ist, sich gleichzeitig mit der epistemischen Kolonialität zu befassen, die von Universitäten aufrechterhalten wird.

Schlagwörter: Modernität/Kolonialität/Dekolonialität, Globalisierung des Wissenskapitalismus, Epistemizid, unterschiedliche Wissensformen, Pluriversalismus

Abstract

Drawing on Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality scholars, I suggest that critiques of neoliberalism in European higher education also need to grapple with issues of coloniality. While the chapters in this volume zoom in on European contexts, their analyses have much wider relevance. Neoliberalism is a global process, where universities are key factors in 'globalizing knowledge capitalism'. At the same time, these universities are also characterized by epistemic colonialism, where only certain kinds of Western epistemologies are consecrated as 'properly scholarly' ways of knowing, and other ways of knowing are delegitimized. I outline how this process of delegitimization has come about through examples of the fate of different ways of knowing in contact with Western universalizing epistemologies. Due to the intimate relationship between capitalism and coloniality, I argue that in order to address the issues raised by the neoliberalisation of universities, it is necessary to simultaneously address the epistemic coloniality perpetuated by such universities.

Keywords: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality, globalizing knowledge capitalism, epistemicide, different ways of knowing, pluriversalism

I.

From the 1990s anthropologists began to raise the alarm about the neoliberal direction universities had begun to take. For instance, Marilyn Strathern's 2000 book *Audit Culture* gathered essays that outlined and analysed the increasing bureaucratization and corporatization of academic work. In that volume, Chris Shore and Susan Wright (2000) give examples showing how anthropology departments in the UK were being required to standardize their practice. Various national educational policies required disciplines to model themselves on corporate organisations and to aim for internal homogeneity of practice and theory (ibid.). Within the European Union this intensification of neoliberal policies shaping the university is attributed to the results of the Bologna process, where in 1999 education ministers from twenty-nine countries signed the Bologna declaration. The Bologna process is mostly known for its aim and attempt to standardise tertiary education across EU member states, purportedly to facilitate the recognition of academic degrees. However, like the situation in the UK, both the driving force and the result, has been a neoliberalization of universities. Anthropologists have been at the forefront of critiques of this shift. Examples include the 'Reclaim the University' movement which began in Aberdeen in 2016, and the efforts examined in this book.

As the contributions to this book attest, this process has further intensified in recent years across Europe (Potkonjak/Škrbić Alempijević, Wolf-Knuts). Even so, anthropologists find ways to critique any romanticization of universities 'back then' (Wolf-Knuts) or of 'folklorism' (Schönberger); they creatively subvert it through developing community-engaged research (Büyüksaraç), designing preferable community futures (Kalkreuter) or finding the possibilities that lie in developing research across university and broader publics (Barkhoff). And while these chapters zoom in on European contexts, their analyses have much wider relevance. This is because the process of neoliberalization itself is a global process. It can be found throughout formal education and its beginnings are situated much earlier than the turn of the 21st Century, when anthropologists began taking note. In this essay I will outline the intimate relationship between capitalism and coloniality. Drawing on Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality scholars, I argue that critiques of neoliberalism in European higher education also need to recognise the inseparability of neoliberalism and coloniality. The reasoning behind this is that it has been persuasively argued by scholars from the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality scholars that capitalism, and its contemporary globalized and hyper fluid development in neoliberalism, and colonialism/imperialism are actually inextricably linked.

South African-based, Cameroonian historian, political theorist and public intellectual Achille Mbembe (2016: 39) notes how the intensification and spread of neoliberalism in universities is a trend that can be observed already at the beginning of the 20th Century in the U.S. There an educational commentator writing in 1918, a certain Thorstein Veblen, identified the business principles shaping the educational environment. Indeed, the late educationalist Ken Robinson argued that the entire formalised school system, which became established in the second half of the 1800s was designed to create docile workers for the then expanding industrial system. According to Robinson formal education was designed both in the image and the interests of industrialism, so that school education becomes a factory for manufacturing workers.[1] Of course, until the 1990s it may have seemed that universities were separate from primary and secondary schooling, especially in terms of faculty members who jealously guarded 'academic freedom'. However, as we will see this separation and supposed freedom is overstated.

Returning to Mbembe, he argues that the neoliberalization of universities is part of a global process. In this, universities are key factors in 'globalizing knowledge capitalism', where

> *[c]ontemporary changes in higher education are based on the deepening of functional linkages between higher education and knowledge capitalism at a time when capitalism has become thoroughly transnational and ruling classes worldwide have become partially denationalized (Mbembe 2016: 39).*

Mbembe goes on to describe neoliberalism as a new governing rationality, one in which everything is 'economized'. This means that every sphere of activity is understood and treated as a market; humans become nothing more than market actors, and importantly every entity is governed as if it were a firm, including universities (ibid.: 40).

It is important to note that even with the spread of globalised knowledge capitalism, and the neoliberal policies that shores it up, critical movements have also emerged around the world. An important example is the *#FeesMustFall* student-led movement that started in South Africa in 2015. The *#FeesMustFall* movement is crucial in this story; it grew out of the *#RhodesMustFall* movement, which called for the decolonisation of the university. These activists noted that for decolonising the university to become a reality, access to university education also needs to be democratised and uncoupled from profiteering interests. However, in the same way the history

1 https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms, accessed 9th Feb 2024.

of the neoliberalization of universities can be traced to an earlier origin, so can the beginnings of this globalising trend, which serves the interests of a specific elite.

II.

The Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) project is a scholarly movement arising in South and central America that gained momentum in the 2000s. Key figures in the MCD project are Argentine-Mexican writer and philosopher, Enrique Dussel, the Peruvian Sociologist, Anibal Quijano, the Colombian Philosopher, Santiago Castro-Gomez, the UC Berkeley-based Sociologist, Ramon Grosfoguel, and the Rutgers University-based Philosopher, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Duke university-based scholars Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, and Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar. The MCD scholars argue that modernity needs to be understood in the same frame as coloniality, and not separately. By extension this implies that critiques of neoliberalism also need to attend to their relationship with coloniality. In MCD analyses coloniality is distinct from colonialism, and decoloniality is distinct from decolonisation. While decolonisation was the political process of formerly colonised states gaining independence mostly happening in the second half of the 20th Century, decoloniality is an ongoing and plural process. Mignolo explains that while decolonisation, and the various schools of scholarship that analysed the process and aftermath, address the content of colonisation, decoloniality questions the very premises those contents assume. The MCD project explores the ontological/epistemological assumptions and power matrices that generate a colonial mindset.

The MCD scholars highlight how Eurocentric histories tend to separate the development of modernity in Europe from colonialism, where colonialism is portrayed as an unfortunate secondary aspect of modernity (Mignolo 2018: 110). In this Eurocentric narrative, colonialism is not causally related to modernity (Shephard 2018: 3). Instead, the MCD project scholars highlight that the flow of resources, people, and ideas from North and South America towards Europe from 1490 onwards, needs to be recognized as essential elements in the development of modernity itself. 'The flow of wealth, people, ideas, new exploitable plant and animal species were key drivers of European Modernity' (Shephard 2018: 4). Mignolo, for instance, writes that because of this modernity and coloniality cannot be disentangled, that coloniality was in fact a co-present factor in the development of modernity itself, and that coloniality is therefore the inescapable darker side of modernity.

There are key differences between earlier post-colonial scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhaba, and Gayatri Spivak and the MCD project. While post-colonial

scholars drew their critiques from the experience of French and British colonialism, MCD scholars shifted attention to earlier imperialism of Spain and Portugal. Basing their arguments on a different historical period they target ideas of European exceptionalism. European exceptionalism states that ideas which are central to modernity, as well as modernity itself, were developed entirely and uniquely by Europeans in Europe. It is this European exceptionalism that legitimises further modern/colonial narratives of Europe bringing 'civilization' to different peoples around the world. The MCD calls for the acknowledgment that the knowledge and culture claimed to be uniquely European results from ongoing intellectual and cultural exchange with myriad others, and this undoes any claim to European superiority. Increasingly there are studies which show that advances in, for instance, modern pathology (Herrera 2018), botany and geography (Gruzinski 2013; Safier 2010) and Scottish Enlightenment philosophy (Metze 2011), grew from engagements with non-Europeans and learning the knowledges they developed.

Another relevant narrative of European exceptionalism relates specifically to the University, which in Eurocentric discourse is also claimed to be a unique European invention from the early Modern period (Goody 2006: 222). Jack Goody, however, shows how universities thrived in ancient Greek and Roman empires, with schools in Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, Beirut, Constantinople, and Gaza. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, although universities and schools of higher education vanished from Europe, philosophy continued to flourish in Athens and Alexandria, a city still extant in present day Egypt. In Alexandria the institution of the Museum 'functioned as a University, with an accent on research' (ibid: 227). Across the Muslim world the *madrasa* shares more similarities than differences with European universities. Although, many Eurocentric scholars discount *madrasas* as examples of universities developed beyond Europe because of the emphasis on theology, this was not different to most European universities which also focused on religion. Furthermore, Goody notes how not all higher education happened in universities.

> *Institutes of higher education and learning had existed in the Ancient Near East at temple 'research institutes', in the Classical world, in ancient Persia, and virtually wherever higher literacy was installed. Like towns, universities were only European from a very narrow point of view, strongly tinged by teleology (Goody 2006: 229).*

A second difference between post-colonial and decolonial scholars is the latter's emphasis on knowledge. Said (1978) already defines Orientalism as a systematic science that organizes Western imaginaries of the 'Orient' through repeated images and ideas in both academic and popular communications. Mignolo argues that postcolonial scholars, such as Said, dwelled mostly on cultural representation

(2018). Instead, the MCD project focuses on coloniality as an epistemic project. In other words, the expansionism characterised by imperialism/colonialism is at heart also a move to universalise European knowledge and ontology (Shepherd 2018: 4).

III.

In the historical encounter between the 'West' and others two things happen. First, 'Westerners' appropriated elements of local knowledge that were deemed useful to Western interests. Such appropriation most often obscured the source of this knowledge, and always included forms of editing to remove the radical aspects of such knowledge. In this editing, any aspects of such local knowledge that might have destabilized Western onto/epistemologies were excised. This continues today. Julie Cruickshank (2012), for instance describes one such project where glaciologists sought to include in their reports the 'Traditional ecological knowledge' of Indigenous inhabitants in the Yukon territory in north-western Canada. The climate scientists and glaciologists tasked with writing up scientific reports included Indigenous descriptions of glacier changes over the years. However, the reports completely omitted that in such Indigenous knowledge, the glacier is animate, that the behaviour of the glacier is contingent, and that glacial changes can only be understood in the light of the glacier's sentience (Cruickshank 2012: 242). While the elements of 'information' that are compatible with Western knowledge systems were incorporated into the glaciologists' reports, the 'magic' was left behind (Leach and Davis 2012: 214). In other words, 'Western knowledge appropriates core elements of local knowledge, in the process reframing these elements and claiming them for its own' (Shepherd 2018: 5).

Second, a crucial aspect in the encounters between Western knowledge, when it is framed as universal, and other ways of knowing is the destruction of these very knowledge practices, which Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) refers to as 'epistemicide'. This is typically done through a process where non-European knowledge traditions and practices are defined as 'culture', 'tradition' or 'belief', in other words as forms of 'non-knowledge'. 'As such they become the object of study of the discipline of anthropology' (Shepherd 2018). Santos (2014) notes that this Western universalist knowledge is operationalised around sets of binaries, which he refers to as 'abyssal thinking'. In this form of thinking, an ontological abyss divides different types of knowledge into two ontologically separate categories, and thus prevents things placed on opposite sides of the line from co-existing. For instance, reason is placed on one side of the abyss, and on the other side there are 'the dark world of passions, intuitions, feelings, emotions, affections, beliefs, faiths, values, myths, and the world of the unsayable' (Santos 2014: 5). Other dichotomies include subject

vs. object, reason vs. emotion, mind vs. body, nature vs. culture, white vs. black, male vs. female, head vs. heart, present vs. past (Shepherd 2018: 6). These appropriations and dichotomies are the basis upon which most current academic disciplines are based.

Another, third, characteristic of Western Science that follows this abyssal thinking – the rhetoric rather than the actual practices that go on in laboratories (Latour 2003) – is that knowledge can be abstracted from the ways of living through which it emerges. The dissociation of *knowing* from *being* treats the world as an object of knowledge ready to be grasped, an understanding that parallels the colonial/capitalist extractivism of resources. In fact, Anishabee and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013) critiques Donna Haraway's use of the notions of the Coyote or the Trickster. On the one hand, Watts appreciates how Haraway's feminist anti-essentialism works to undermine universalist depictions of knowledge. On the other hand, in the way Haraway uses concepts from localized knowledge, Watts notes that the Indigenous histories and protocols around such knowledge and stories are absent. In this, definitions of 'knowledge' remain dictated by Western principles and Indigenous stories become abstracted tools. Essentially what this does is 'to erase the embodied, practised, and legal-governance aspects of Indigenous ontologies as they are enacted by Indigenous actors' (Todd 2015: 17).

Important proposals by Indigenous scholars include redefining knowledge as emplaced. Watts proposes a principle of 'Indigenous Place-Thought', in which knowledge is effectively relational and situated (cited in Todd 2016). Dwight Conquergood (2002), similarly argued for knowledge to be redefined as located, engaged and in solidarity, rather than transcendent, abstracted, and separated off from daily life. In a similar vein, Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli-Meyer (2008, cited in Magnat 2020) proposes that Hawaiian epistemology is relevant beyond the confines of the geography where it originates, that it has universal relevance. However, the conception of universality she works with is based on the notion of specificity: a place-specific understanding of universality (ibid.). I understand this to mean that it is essential to acknowledge the specific emplaced source of different understandings of the world, so that such understandings do not get imposed on others as universal or necessary. However, these understandings of the world can be relevant or put to work in other places too. This reminds me of what Joel Robbins (2010) calls 'proposals for universals', where ideas or practices emerging from specific localities and socialities can be proposed for wider application and relevance. In my understanding, this approach to 'universality' is processual and social: there

is no assumption that one way of knowing is the correct one, to be imposed on others, but it can be argued that notions and practices from one place can be of much wider value.

IV.

The dichotomies that compose the Eurocentric, colonial understanding of knowledge itself begin to indicate that they produce forms of internal epistemicide, where ways of knowing that originate geographically in 'Europe' are also exiled to the non-knowledge side of the ontological abyss. Here we have an instance of Occidentalism, or at least of one of the ways in which Occidentalism is defined. When the 'West' subjects 'others' to the image of 'Orientalism' it is simultaneously projecting a mirror image of itself, equally fallacious (Santos 2014). In this definition of Occidentalism, Europe itself is flattened and homogenized, and differences are papered over (see also Chakrabarty 2000). Over the past five hundred years, any way of knowing that didn't fit the universalizing, logocentric, androcentric epistemology of this Occidentalism was also silenced (Santos 2014). Here, I offer a different example: Goethean Science.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is nowadays most revered for his poetry, on par with Shakespeare in English literature, and Cervantes for the Spanish. Less known today is that Goethe also developed a distinct empirical scientific approach. This example is especially interesting because Goethean Science is slowly growing in significance, especially in the sphere of ecology and sustainability, which signals the sorts of changes already afoot that critique and offer alternatives to the coloniality and neoliberalization of knowledge and research (see Escobar 2020).

Goethe understood the human perceiver as inseparable from the phenomena they wanted to observe. He argued that nature permeates everything, including the human mind and imagination. Therefore, to study the world, Goethe proposed methods that were deeply participatory, that envisioned knowledge as a relational process between person and different aspects of the world (Holdrege 2005). This stands in stark contrast with Cartesian-Newtonian methods which presuppose a clear separation between observer and observed. Goethe´s concept of science is one in which 'not only the object of observation changes and moves but also the subject of observation' (Wellmon 2010). Since Goethean science explicitly challenges Cartesian-Newtonian epistemologies, and in its specifics challenges the dualities of subject/object, it is held in contempt by mainstream science (Ingold 2013).[2] The fate of

2 See Ingold 2023 for an analysis of Goethe's critique of Newton's optics.

Goethe's science exemplifies Santos's argument that any way of knowing, whether originating in 'Europe' or elsewhere that does not fit with a specific universalizing, colonialist, extractivist epistemology is externalized and so de-legitimised.

V.

Going forward, two principles can be drawn from this discussion. First, I have suggested that to address neoliberalism at the university it will be necessary to simultaneously address coloniality. This is because, as the MCD project and scholars such as Mbembe have shown, neoliberalism and coloniality are inextricably linked aspects of the contemporary capitalization and globalization of knowledge. In addition, although the relationship between neoliberalism and coloniality is elided in most Eurocentric narratives, coloniality nonetheless shapes the sorts of epistemic exclusion that characterizes universities anywhere, even in Europe. It is the coloniality of knowledge that maintains, for instance, the hierarchy of the natural sciences over the humanities; a situation where disciplines such as gender studies are widely dismissed as political projects rather than valid scholarship (Pereira 2017), and the myth of 'objectivity'.

Second, therefore, coloniality subjugates different ways of knowing across the world including, even within the geographical and ideological area referred to as 'Europe'. The elites that benefited, and continue to benefit, from imperial and colonial domination, also benefited from what is sometimes called 'internal' colonization. This takes many forms, whether it is the crushing of different languages in the process of nation-building (Magnat 2020), the silencing of gendered ways of knowing and, by means of the theory/practice divide, relegating countless knowledge practices to scholarly irrelevance, class divisions and so on and so forth.

Considering its history, it might be the very fabric of the Eurocentric, globalized university which will need to be reformed. A fabric woven by twin threads: the notion of knowledge as universal, abstractable and free floating; and the notion of capital as a universal vessel for exchange value, and one that, ideally, is also abstractable and free flowing. Due to ongoing coloniality and racism, Jobson (2021) makes the case for letting anthropology burn. Having reflected on the deep involvement of the institution of the university with coloniality, neoliberalism and the subjugation of different ways of knowing, I wonder whether there is a case to let universities, as well as anthropology, burn and rebuild entirely new institutions from the ashes. Such renewed institutions could build on the decolonial relational and pluriversal imaginaries being developed both within and outwith universities around the world. But that needs to be a story for next time.

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