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Rethinking comparative politics in the context of debates about decolonising higher education

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Abstract

In recent years, interest in the topic of the decolonisation of higher education curricula has intensified. A key aspect of attempts to decolonise higher education is the decolonisation of university curricula. This paper explores the question of curricular decolonisation in relation to comparative politics. The paper begins with an overview of debates on curricular decolonisation, proceeding to a discussion of the specific challenges that arise when trying to decolonise comparative politics. I then discuss some changes introduced to a first-year comparative politics course I teach to South African students, detailing my attempts to change the course in the light of debates on decolonising the curriculum. The paper concludes with reflections on some of the shortcomings of the intervention discussed, especially in terms of the persistence of Eurocentric orientations among some of my students and the difficulty in fostering sustained interactive learning.

Keywords: decolonisation of higher education, comparative politics, decolonisation of curricula

Introduction

A key imperative in South African higher education is the transformation or decolonisation of higher education curricula. Given South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, there is a need to continuously interrogate our university curricula to ensure that they no longer embody and perpetuate the values and assumptions of colonialism and apartheid. Most South African universities have officially acknowledged the need for curriculum change in their policies or in special initiatives they have taken to transform their curricula. Such change aims to make university curricula more responsive to our contexts and ensure that such curricula recognise and include knowledge created in various places and from multiple perspectives.

In this paper, I explore how we can rethink university curricula in light of debates on decolonising the curriculum. My particular focus is on an introductory comparative politics course component presented to first-year students at Rhodes University in South Africa. This course is a component of Political and International Studies 102, presented in the second semester of the

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first-year Political and International Studies programme. The students concerned are mostly first-year Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Social Science students, and the class usually consists of between 250 and 350 students. The rethinking of this course happened as part of my participation in the Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) programme which aims to improve teaching quality at South African universities, focusing on building socially just education.[1] Ethical approval for this research was given by my institution (2022-5821-6964).

The increased prominence of the decolonial school and the very visible student protests around decolonising the curriculum have ensured that university lecturers in South Africa are aware that we are supposed to be decolonising our curricula. However, despite this awareness, there is much uncertainty and debate about what it means to do this work of decolonising the curriculum (Jansen & Walters, 2022: 90-114). Many discussions of the decolonisation of the curriculum are very broad and general and do not address specific disciplinary areas. Practical descriptions of attempts at curricular decolonisation can help us better concretise the term and invite useful interrogation of existing initiatives. This paper sets out to provide such a description in relation to comparative politics. While the focus of the discussion is on a comparative politics course, the intervention discussed is likely to also be of relevance to other disciplines, especially in the Humanities. Throughout the paper, I engage with various theorists who talk about the politics of knowledge production, including with the so-called "decolonial" thinkers who have been at the forefront of recent calls for the decolonisation of university curricula. However, I should stress at the outset that this paper is not rooted solely in decolonial theory and that its content is relevant to anyone interested in the politics of knowledge production, regardless of their particular theoretical or ideological position.

"Decolonising" Knowledge

Over the last decade, the idea that university curricula should be "decolonised" has become increasingly prominent in South Africa and beyond. Countless books, conferences, and journal special issues have recently tackled this topic – for a small South African sample, see Heleta (2016), Hlatshwayo, et al. (2022), Jansen and Walters (2022), Motala, et al. (2021), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Quinn (2019), and Osman and Maringe (2019). This increased prominence is partly due to the 2015 and 2016 student protests, which were principally about student fees, but also raised important points about the need for more radical change in terms of who teaches at universities and what is taught.[2] During these protests, many students called for the

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[1] As part of the TAU programme, experienced university lecturers from around the country embark upon group and individual projects aimed at improving teaching. You can read more about the programme here: https://taufellowships.org.za/.

[2] During 2015 and 2016, most South African universities experienced student protests related to fee increases and to other concerns, such as the lack of transformation at universities, racist institutional cultures and gender-based violence. These protests received significant media attention. At the same time, some other parts of the world also experienced student protests on similar themes. The books and articles listed earlier in this paragraph provide more information on the protests in South Africa and beyond.

"decolonisation" of university curricula to create conditions in which black students no longer feel alienated and marginalised. Calls for the decolonisation of South African universities followed on from several decades during which there had been calls for transformation at universities. Such calls were also intended to drive changes at South African universities to make them more suited to the post-apartheid context. While the two terms have different connotations and the idea of "transformation" has fallen somewhat into disfavour (see Jansen & Walters, 2022: 90-95), the prominence given to calls for transformation and decolonisation over the last two decades in South African higher education mean that academics working in this context are certainly aware that there are expectations that their curricula should be changed in some way. However, this does not mean that South African academics are necessarily committed to transforming or decolonising their curricula nor that they are sure about how to go about this.

Calls for the decolonisation of university curricula are influenced by broader debates on the politics of knowledge production. The role of knowledge in creating and perpetuating colonial power is a central aspect of the work of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said (1978, 1993) and VY Mudimbe (1988, 1991, 1994). Such scholars show how knowledge produced about colonial subjects played a role in their subjugation. More recently, the so-called "decolonial turn" has brought renewed energy to discussions of the role of knowledge in the perpetuation of colonial and imperial power. Decolonial scholars argue that colonialism lives on today through "coloniality" which is defined by Tamale (2020: xiii) as 'the long-standing patterns of power that resulted from European colonialism, including knowledge production and the establishment of social orders'. A key part of coloniality is the 'coloniality of knowledge' which involves the 'epistemological invasion of the mental universe' of the colonised (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 2). Decolonial scholarship seeks to 'delink from the core of the imperial politics of knowledge production' to produce new forms of knowledge (Mignolo, 2017). Advocates of decoloniality invite scholars from former colonised parts of the world to be 'epistemically disobedient' through challenging Eurocentric knowledge production (Ndlovu, 2018: 110). The role of knowledge is foregrounded by such scholars who believe that epistemic domination is as important (if not more important) to address than political and economic domination. For example, Mignolo and Walsh (2018: 135) make the following claim:

> What matters is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge. Better yet, what matters is history, politics, economics, race, gender, sexuality, but it is above all the knowledge that is intertwined in all these praxical spheres that entangles us to the point of making us believe that it is not knowledge that matters but really history, economy, politics, etc.

If one adopts this approach to knowledge (or even a more moderate position that emphasises the importance of knowledge alongside history, economics, and politics), then changing knowledge becomes the most vital component of any anti-colonial project. Universities can then be considered central to struggles against coloniality.

Many contributors to debates about decolonising higher education stress that it is a very open-ended, continuous, and fraught process (Andreotti, et al., 2015; Stein 2018). As Menezes de Souza (2021: xvi) warns, declaring that one speaks from a 'non-hegemonic locus of enunciation' is not enough; we must identify and interrogate the ways in which coloniality may inform and affect our position. We ought to acknowledge that trying to imagine a decolonised university from within the 'modern/colonial global imaginary' is limiting (Stein, et al., 2016). However, as it is not possible to fully step outside our current frames of reference, one is obliged to speak from this limiting location. Thus, we need to recognise that while fully delinking from current knowledge systems is impossible, it is possible and necessary to recognise and move beyond the limits of dominant forms of knowledge production and to begin to imagine new ways to create and share knowledge.

As shown above, there is currently a rich debate, in South Africa and beyond, about decolonising university curricula. However, there are some concerns about decolonising knowledge (and about the decolonial theorists who champion it), which should be acknowledged before continuing. Firstly, the decolonial school has been criticised for over-emphasising the role of knowledge in shaping power relations. The passage from Mignolo and Walsh quoted above, in which they insist on the primacy of knowledge, is surely open to critique – critics like Nassen Smith and Lester (2023) and Okoth (2021) disagree that knowledge matters more than history, economics and politics. Surely a more defensible position is provided by Mudimbe (1988: 2), who argues that the domination of space, economies, and minds are complementary and together create 'the colonizing structure' which we seek to challenge. Regardless of these differences, postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, as well as many others, agree that rethinking knowledge is important if we are to fully heal from the damage done by colonialism and coloniality. We do not need to share the decolonial thinkers' view that the contemporary knowledge system is the primary cause of contemporary injustices to agree that it is important to rethink how knowledge is produced and taught. As Hull (2019: 30) points out, it is possible to be committed to the project of intellectual decolonisation – understood as 'the removal or undoing of the effects of colonial, neocolonial and other international power relations, where, and to the extent that, these have hindered the attainment of knowledge and other worthwhile intellectual goals' – without necessarily agreeing with decolonial theory as a whole. I stress this point in order to invite even university lecturers who do not agree with some of the arguments of the decolonial school to nevertheless consider it worthwhile to rethink their curricula. This paper is focused on the broader goal of decolonising knowledge (understood in the sense that Hull indicates above), rather than on the narrower project of producing a curriculum rooted in decolonial theory.

A second problem with the idea of "decolonising" knowledge is that the term "decolonising" is arguably being overused and misused. Some sceptical commentators talk of a 'decolonisation hype' (Behari-Leak, 2019: 58) and caution that many are jumping on the 'decolonial bandwagon' (Moosavi, 2020) without any deep commitment to addressing coloniality. Tuck and Yang (2012: 3) warn that white scholars use discourse about decolonisation in ways that ultimately aim to 'reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity'. It is possible that talking about decolonising university curricula works to paper over the more significant ways in which colonial forms of power and domination remain in our universities and broader society. Talk of decolonising knowledge may prevent some of the more radical and meaningful societal and political changes (such as returning stolen land) needed to create a decolonised future.

From a very different perspective, Táíwò (2022) critiques the way the term "decolonisation" has been used in recent years, arguing that the language of decolonisation should be reserved for the project of achieving political independence. He says that the current use of the term to mean the forswearing of 'any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past' is a dangerous over-extension of the term (Táíwò, 2002: 26).

It is clear that the legitimacy of using the term "decolonising" when talking about university curriculum is questioned by many, leaving me unsure whether or not to use the term. The main reason I have decided to use the term is simply that others are using it, so it seems necessary to use it to indicate that I am connecting with an existing conversation on this topic. There is an existing conversation on decolonising the curriculum and so it seems necessary to use the term "decolonising" even if one accepts that this term is being over-used or misused. I therefore use the term in order to connect what I am saying with a broader conversation going on around me. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that, as a white person, my writing on this topic could indeed be understood as what Tuck and Yang (2012: 3-4) call a 'settler move to innocence' in that by writing on this topic, I potentially legitimise (or seek to legitimise) my continued presence and role in knowledge production. While it is fair for others to question my motives in thinking and writing on decolonisation, it also seems fair to say that if I am going to continue to teach and write in and about South Africa, I should engage with and attend to contemporary debates on decolonising knowledge, given their importance and influence. This paper is an attempt to do this.

"Decolonising" Comparative Politics

The discipline of political studies has historically been shaped by authors in Europe and North America and has disproportionately reflected the experiences and priorities of their societies. When thinking about comparative politics, this bias is particularly clear as the foundations of comparative politics are profoundly Western-centric, even though comparative politics, unlike some other sub-disciplines in political studies, does study political experiences outside of the West. As its name suggests, comparative politics centres comparison, typically between different states. Comparative politics came about as a field of study during the Cold War era when scholars in the United States of America began to study other parts of the world to understand them better (Shilliam, 2021). It developed alongside ideas about political modernisation and development which were central to American political science at the time (Chandhoke, 1996). The USA at the time was taking up a position of global dominance and sought to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining influence in those parts of the world. While not all comparative politics scholars accepted and endorsed the Cold War logic of the time, the funding and institutional support for comparative politics would not have existed if the USA had not been interested in investing in the kinds of scholarly work which could entrench its position of relative dominance. Comparative politics is rooted in the kind of us/them logic described so well by scholars like Edward Said and VY Mudimbe. In his book *Orientalism,* Said (1978) describes how Western scholars' study of Eastern countries entailed contrasting Western countries with Eastern countries in a way that presents the West as normative and the East as deviant. As Said (1978: 41) explains: 'Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline and governing'. Similarly, Mudimbe argues that the study of Africa by Western scholars is rooted in an attempt to portray Africa as Europe's deviant other. Mudimbe (1988: 12) explains that from the perspective of such Western scholarship, '[t]he African has become not only the Other who is everyone except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same'. By studying "foreign" parts of the world, Western scholars were able to establish the West as the norm to which all other parts of the world should aspire.

Shilliam (2021) explains this establishment of the West as the norm with reference to 'the colonial paradox of comparison'. This paradox involves a process of comparison whereby difference is recognised but also denied. Comparative politics scholarship typically acknowledges that there are differences in how societies are organised, but then disavows such differences by presenting one society – the Western one – as superior to all others. As Shilliam (2021) explains it:

> The seemingly paradoxical logic is that, on the one hand, difference is accepted analytically – meaning, how we understand our human experience by breaking it down into logically connecting parts, while on the other hand, difference is disavowed normatively – meaning, how we believe that we should live as humans.

In this way, Western societies are presented as the ideal societies which all other societies should emulate. Comparative politics then becomes the study of the ways in which non-Western societies deviate from the desirable Western norm and of how such societies can be assisted to become more similar to the Western norm.

This colonial paradox of comparison is not necessarily glaringly evident in every comparative politics textbook, but it lurks in the background. For example, most comparative politics textbooks begin by describing how politics operates in Western states and then move to discuss non-Western states, using the Western states as a kind of normative template. The idea of statehood, which is used as a basis of comparison, is conceptualised through consideration of how Western nations became states and how they structure their states, with all other states being unfavourably compared to these Western states. The norm for how politics is supposed to operate is thus based on the Western experience.

Teaching Comparative Politics in South Africa: My intervention

What does this history of comparative politics mean for those of us teaching comparative politics in South Africa or other parts of the Global South?[3] Can we "decolonise" comparative politics? One possible response to the history of comparative politics is to decide to simply not to teach it at all. However, using comparison in some way when studying politics seems both inevitable and essential – surely, we cannot understand how politics works if we do not compare how different political institutions and ideas take shape in different contexts. Therefore, perhaps what is needed is to change how we think about comparative politics rather than to reject the sub-discipline completely. I have taught comparative politics for many years, and this has been my guiding assumption. I want students to compare how politics works in different parts of the world, but I want to teach them to do this without setting up one part of the world as normative and others as deviant.

I have recently redesigned a first-year comparative politics course. In doing so, I am trying to be attentive to current debates around decolonising the curriculum by making the content appropriate for and responsive to my context and teaching the course in a way that encourages students to be active and critical learners. Debates about decolonisation focus both on curriculum and pedagogy but, as Zembylas (2018: 1) points out, more attention has been given to the question of curricular decolonisation and less to the question of what this all means for pedagogy and praxis. Consequently, there is plenty of discussion about how to shift the *content* of courses at universities but not as much discussion of how to teach differently in the classroom. My intervention seeks to think carefully both about content (what is taught) and pedagogy (how it is taught).

Rethinking the course content

In terms of content, my intervention involves three broad strategies. Firstly, I invite students to think critically about comparative politics itself. I introduce students to comparative politics in a way that highlights the value of comparison but also critiques how comparative politics typically operates. This is done by introducing students to a mainstream introduction to comparative politics as well as a more critical reading, namely Shilliam's (2021) chapter on decolonising comparative politics. Secondly, I encourage students to critically interrogate the political concepts we use in the course. Students are asked to think critically about the concepts of "the state" and "development" by being introduced both to more mainstream and more critical texts on these concepts. Thirdly, I present the case study countries in a way that does not set up any country (or set of countries) as the norm.

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[3] The term "Global South" is used in different ways by different people. For a discussion of the origins of the term, see Heine (2023). For a discussion of some of the complexities that arise in relation to the term, see Trefzer, et al. (2014). I use the term here simply to mean countries that were not key contributors to the shaping of comparative politics – as discussed in the previous section, comparative politics was shaped by scholars in North America and Western Europe. My interest is in what this means for those of us teaching comparative politics elsewhere.

The basic course structure is summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Comparative Politics course structure

Content	**Intention**
Theme One: What is comparative politics? • Three readings: ○ Two short conventional introductions to comparative politics. ○ One longer reading on how to decolonise comparative politics.	To introduce students to the idea of comparison. To highlight the problem of the colonial paradox of comparison.
Theme Two: What is the state? • Three readings: ○ Some introductory notes I wrote to provide an overview. ○ A mainstream textbook introduction to statehood. ○ A critique of mainstream approaches to the state from an African perspective.	To allow students to understand what is meant by the concept “the state” - a key concept in political studies. To encourage students to think about the state from various perspectives and to interrogate dominant Western-centric approaches to the state.
Theme Three: What is development? • Three readings: ○ One mainstream textbook introduction to the idea of development. ○ Two critiques of the idea of development.	To introduce the idea of development and how it relates to politics. To encourage students to recognise how the colonial paradox of comparison (introduced in Theme One) is at play in discussions of development.
Theme Four: Comparing States, Comparing Development *NOTE: this theme did not happen at the end of the course, but ran alongside the other three themes.* In this theme, students were invited to engage with five case study countries in various ways (readings, news, online information, etc.). The five case studies were presented alphabetically: • Brazil • China • Germany • Nigeria • Russia	To get students to learn more about other countries. To encourage students to apply what they learnt in other themes to these five countries. To compare the countries in terms of how they became states and what can be said about their development.

In this course structure, I seek to make students aware of Shilliam’s concept of the colonial paradox of comparison, such that they can try to avoid this paradox when they compare their different case studies. I do this by ensuring that students are never presented only with mainstream, Eurocentric content, but are always introduced to a range of views, including views which challenge dominant perspectives.

Rethinking Pedagogy

As discussed earlier, decolonising the curriculum cannot just be about content but should also be about pedagogy. Traditional pedagogical approaches often assume that knowledge is something that the lecturer possesses and then transmits to the student. This assumption is very compatible with the standard lecture format where the lecturer speaks and shows audiovisual materials while the students listen. However, alternative approaches to pedagogy, such as those advanced by feminist thinkers like Donna Haraway, 'trouble the notion of knowledge being located in particular individuals who transmit it to less knowledgeable others' (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2021: 30). Rather, as argued by Bozalek and Zembylas (2021: 30) knowledge is produced through entangled relationships between students, texts, theories, lecturers, and the spaces in which learning occurs. Scholars drawing on the radical pedagogy tradition associated with Paulo Freire also emphasise that if we want to produce knowledge differently, we also have to rethink pedagogical processes which present lecturers as knowledge producers and students as knowledge consumers (Menezes de Souza, 2021: xx).

These approaches to pedagogy help us see that we cannot decolonise university curricula by simply changing *what* we teach – we also have to rethink *how* we teach. We cannot just take our new supposedly decolonised curriculum content and share it by standing statically in front of the classroom speaking while students listen. Furthermore, if we adopt a critical approach to the politics of knowledge creation then we should encourage students to question and interrogate what they learn, which requires them to engage actively and interactively with the texts they read, with each other and with the course facilitators. It would not make sense for me to stand in front of the class and insist that students challenge and disrupt Eurocentric knowledge, while not encouraging them to think critically about the process whereby knowledge is produced and shared in our classroom.

As I have become more convinced of this way of thinking about knowledge creation, I have been trying to find ways to make my classrooms more interactive and to encourage creative, participatory ways of learning. However, with my bigger undergraduate groups, this has been made more difficult because these classes are very large (the first-year class typically has more than 300 students), and the classroom design does not invite peer interaction. Indeed, the design subtly disciplines the students into thinking that their role is to look and listen, while mine is to speak. The students sit in raked seating that faces the lecturer. No microphones are attached to their seats, with a microphone only being provided to the instructor. As Ira Shor (1996) explains:

> Classroom furniture helps discipline students into a status quo of inequality. … Like plants growing toward sunlight, students are expected to sit in rows facing the lecturing teacher at the front, the unilateral authority who tells them what things mean, what to do, and how to become people who fit into society as it is. This classroom design is an architecture of

> control that helps teachers assert their authority to transmit an official syllabus to the students ….

The room communicates the idea that the instructor should talk (and present audio-visual material) while the students should listen. This physical set-up suggests that knowledge is something static handed down from lecturer to student. Ronald Scapp (in hooks 1994) explains it this way:

> The traditional notion of being in the classroom is a teacher behind a desk or standing at the front, immobilized. In a weird way that recalls the firm, immobilized body of knowledge as part of the immutability of truth itself.

If we want students to think about knowledge as contested and to understand that knowledge production is a collaborative social project, we need to get them more actively involved in their learning. They should be talking – to me and each other – in the class and should be able to question and critique the content being presented.

Furthermore, as a white lecturer teaching mostly black students, it is important to reflect on the way that this dynamic (white teacher/black student) could perpetuate existing racialised dynamics in which knowledge is seen to be something produced by (white) Europeans, with (black) Africans treated as the objects of knowledge. There is something potentially ironic (especially in the South African context) about a white teacher presenting a curriculum purported to disrupt coloniality. I reflect on this elsewhere (see Matthews, 2021) and will not elaborate further here except to highlight that in cases where the lecturer is white, it may be even more important to try to introduce pedagogical strategies which decentre the lecturer and encourage student involvement and peer interaction.

I am yet to make any significant progress in making the first-year lecture sessions more interactive, but I have been able to introduce some small interventions which I hope to build on in future years. One such intervention is the introduction of in-class activities whereby students would do some writing and peer discussion during lecture periods. For example, I ask students to write down their understanding of a concept and then share their understanding with a peer or I ask them to work together in small groups to discuss or apply a concept. They subsequently submit this small written task to enable me to assess their understanding. I have also begun using interactive tools like Slido and Wooclap to get instant reactions from students during class. Such tools allow students to use their mobile phones to answer questions during class. Their responses (which can be anonymised) are displayed instantly on the screen for all to see. These tools can also be used for polling and other similar exercises. They allow students to see in real-time what other students are thinking and to react to their peers. Below are two examples of how this kind of tool works. In the first example (Figure 1), I asked students what they knew about Brazil, which was one of our study countries. Their answers helped me to start the conversation about Brazil. In the second example (Figure 2), I asked students which words or phrases they had not understood in a reading. I could then explain the words and terms or get them to work together to explain them to each other.

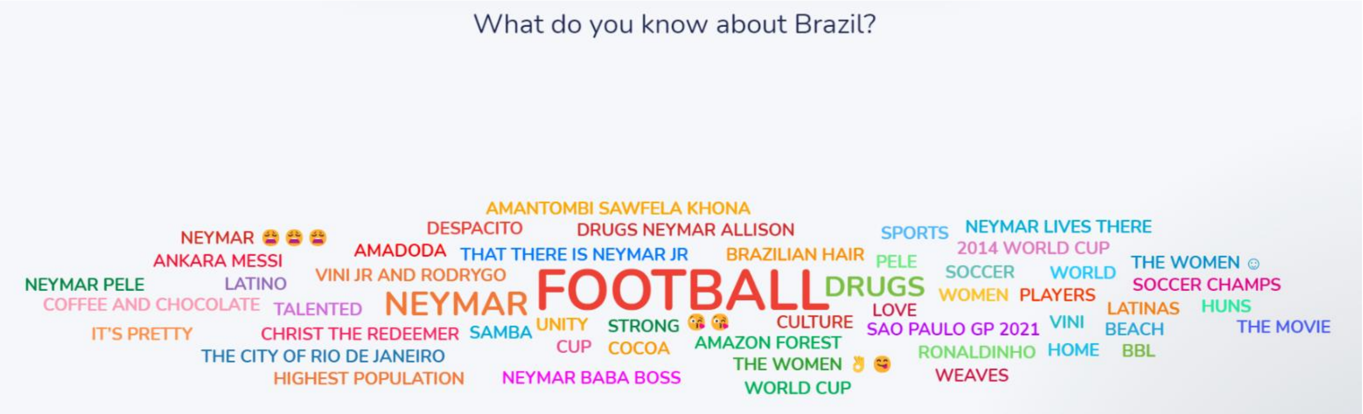

What do you know about Brazil?
AMANTOMBI SAWFELA KHONA
NEYMAR 😩😩😩
DESPACITO
DRUGS NEYMAR ALLISON
SPORTS
NEYMAR LIVES THERE
ANKARA MESSI
AMADODA
THAT THERE IS NEYMAR JR
BRAZILIAN HAIR
PELE
2014 WORLD CUP
THE WOMEN ☺
NEYMAR PELE
LATINO
VINI JR AND RODRYGO
SOCCER
WORLD
SOCCER CHAMPS
COFFEE AND CHOCOLATE
TALENTED
NEYMAR
FOOTBALL
DRUGS
WOMEN
PLAYERS
LATINAS
HUNS
LOVE
IT'S PRETTY
CHRIST THE REDEEMER
SAMBA
UNITY
STRONG 😘😘
CULTURE
SAO PAULO GP 2021
VINI
BEACH
THE MOVIE
THE CITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO
CUP
COCOA
AMAZON FOREST
RONALDINHO
HOME
BBL
THE WOMEN 👌😋
HIGHEST POPULATION
NEYMAR BABA BOSS
WORLD CUP
WEAVES

Figure 1: Students' knowledge of Brazil

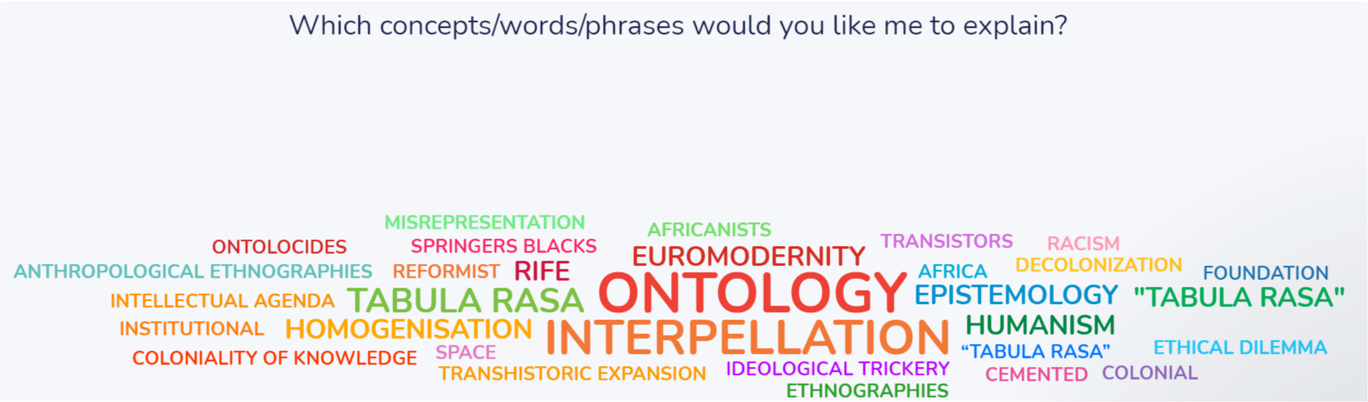
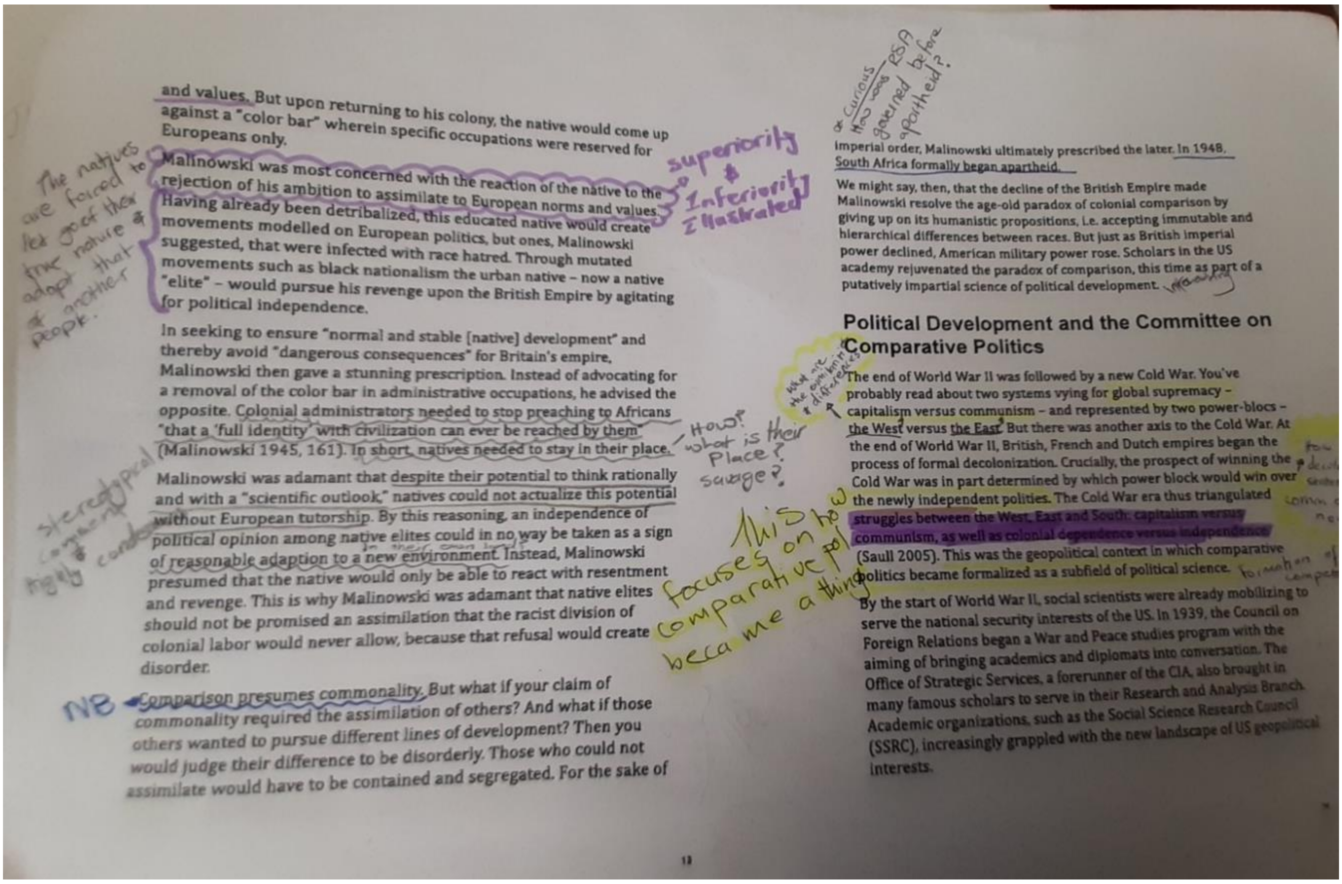

Which concepts/words/phrases would you like me to explain?
MISREPRESENTATION
AFRICANISTS
ONTOLOCIDES
SPRINGERS BLACKS
TRANSISTORS
RACISM
EUROMODERNITY
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHNOGRAPHIES
REFORMIST
RIFE
AFRICA
DECOLONIZATION
FOUNDATION
INTELLECTUAL AGENDA
TABULA RASA
ONTOLOGY
EPISTEMOLOGY
"TABULA RASA"
INSTITUTIONAL
HOMOGENISATION
HUMANISM
INTERPELLATION
COLONIALITY OF KNOWLEDGE
SPACE
"TABULA RASA"
ETHICAL DILEMMA
TRANSHISTORIC EXPANSION
IDEOLOGICAL TRICKERY
CEMENTED
COLONIAL
ETHNOGRAPHIES

Figure 2: Words/phrases students needed more clarity on

Another strategy I used was to ask students to read and write comments on printed course readings and then share their comments and ideas with each other to encourage a collaborative, interactive way of reading. While I have done this using old-fashioned hard copies of texts, online platforms such as Hypothesis and Perusall, can be used to do this online. Here is an example of a page from a reading where the student has read in an active, involved way:



and values. But upon returning to his colony, the native would come up against a "color bar" wherein specific occupations were reserved for Europeans only.

Malinowski was most concerned with the reaction of the native to the rejection of his ambition to assimilate to European norms and values. Having already been detribalized, this educated native would create movements modelled on European politics, but ones, Malinowski suggested, that were infected with race hatred. Through mutated movements such as black nationalism the urban native – now a native "elite" – would pursue his revenge upon the British Empire by agitating for political independence.

The natives are forced to let go of their true nature & adopt that of another people.

superiority & Inferiority Illustrated

In seeking to ensure "normal and stable [native] development" and thereby avoid "dangerous consequences" for Britain's empire, Malinowski then gave a stunning prescription. Instead of advocating for a removal of the color bar in administrative occupations, he advised the opposite. Colonial administrators needed to stop preaching to Africans "that a 'full identity' with civilization can ever be reached by them" (Malinowski 1945, 161). In short, natives needed to stay in their place.

How? what is their Place? savage?

Malinowski was adamant that despite their potential to think rationally and with a "scientific outlook," natives could not actualize this potential without European tutorship. By this reasoning, an independence of political opinion among native elites could in no way be taken as a sign of reasonable adaption to a new environment. Instead, Malinowski presumed that the native would only be able to react with resentment and revenge. This is why Malinowski was adamant that native elites should not be promised an assimilation that the racist division of colonial labor would never allow, because that refusal would create disorder.

In their own land?

stereotypical judgement & highly condescending

NB Comparison presumes commonality. But what if your claim of commonality required the assimilation of others? And what if those others wanted to pursue different lines of development? Then you would judge their difference to be disorderly. Those who could not assimilate would have to be contained and segregated. For the sake of

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& Curious How was RSA governed before apartheid?

imperial order, Malinowski ultimately prescribed the later. In 1948, South Africa formally began apartheid.

We might say, then, that the decline of the British Empire made Malinowski resolve the age-old paradox of colonial comparison by giving up on its humanistic propositions, i.e. accepting immutable and hierarchical differences between races. But just as British imperial power declined, American military power rose. Scholars in the US academy rejuvenated the paradox of comparison, this time as part of a putatively impartial science of political development. Meaning

Political Development and the Committee on Comparative Politics

What are the similarities & differences

The end of World War II was followed by a new Cold War. You've probably read about two systems vying for global supremacy – capitalism versus communism – and represented by two power-blocs – the West versus the East. But there was another axis to the Cold War. At the end of World War II, British, French and Dutch empires began the process of formal decolonization. Crucially, the prospect of winning the Cold War was in part determined by which power block would win over the newly independent polities. The Cold War era thus triangulated struggles between the West, East and South: capitalism versus communism, as well as colonial dependence versus independence (Saull 2005). This was the geopolitical context in which comparative politics became formalized as a subfield of political science.

This is how focuses on comparative pol became a thing

By the start of World War II, social scientists were already mobilizing to serve the national security interests of the US. In 1939, the Council on Foreign Relations began a War and Peace studies program with the aiming of bringing academics and diplomats into conversation. The Office of Strategic Services, a forerunner of the CIA, also brought in many famous scholars to serve in their Research and Analysis Branch. Academic organizations, such as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), increasingly grappled with the new landscape of US geopolitical interests.

Figure 3: Example of student reading actively

The comments and questions on the readings can be used in class to stimulate further discussion and to help students see new ways to engage with texts.

Reflections on this Intervention

Teaching the course was generally a positive experience, and the course evaluations were mostly positive (more than 85% of students found the course to be a positive or good learning experience). They were generally enthusiastic about the use of interactive tools in the classroom. Students also appreciated learning about different countries with many of them mentioning this when asked to say what they most liked about the course. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that the course successfully got students to become critical and engaged learners and to compare without treating Western countries as normative. In the rest of the paper, I will discuss some of the challenges I faced and which I will try to address in years to come.

Many did not really understand or engage with the core idea (the colonial paradox of comparison)

Despite my attempts to get students to recognise and avoid the colonial paradox of comparison, many of the students maintained (or perhaps even developed) views that reflect rather than challenge this paradox. Shilliam (2021), whose work the students read at the beginning of the course, encourages us to see that mainstream comparative politics often recognises difference, but then quickly moves on to rank those differences and to suggest that non-Western countries need to become more like the West. He suggests that to escape this colonial paradox, we need to compare in a way that is not so quick to prescribe a single desirable destiny (Westernisation) for all Global South countries.

However, many of my students seemed to unreflectively support Westernisation. For example, some students expressed very positive views about Germany, the only Western state we studied, and suggested that some of our other case study countries (such as Nigeria or Brazil) ought to become more like Western countries. Consider the following comments, all taken from essays or exams written by students in the course:

> Germany is one country that is hard-working, more innovat[iv]e, better values, etc. Sudan, by contrast, is one country that is still struggling to catch up a way of doing things better.
>
> The world has evolved from a very poor era to its greatest form. Some countries have independently led themselves to civilised societies while other countries had a helping hand from their colonisers. European countries seem to have more countries with almost the perfect society compared to African countries.
>
> According to Chitonge (2021: 1) using European models of statehood to understand statehood in Africa assumes that Europeans set the standard of what statehood is and other states should be evaluated using European standards. The state of Germany didn’t need a template for statehood though it was in conflict for many years and also because it is a European state, but the state of Nigeria needs European guidance and expertise to form statehood because it is in Africa.

The above comments suggest that European states are or should be models for African or other non-Western states. It is noteworthy that such students do not directly challenge the more critical readings I presented them with, but rather seem not to have understood them. For example, the last student quotes Chitonge (2021) – who provides a critique of Eurocentric approaches to statehood – but then immediately makes some very Eurocentric claims of the kind Chitonge’s article critiques. Chitonge argues that our understanding of what it means to be a state should be based on the experiences of all states, rather than being based on an ideal type drawn from the European experience, yet the student comments that Nigeria needs ‘European guidance and expertise to form statehood’. Students who made claims like those above did not seem to disagree with the various critical readings I had assigned them and to critically interrogate these articles. Rather, they quite simply did not seem to have carefully read or understood these articles and seemed to think it obvious that Western states should guide and assist non-Western states to become more like them. These students are thus not providing sophisticated defences of Western superiority, but rather seem to have been exposed to and to have uncritically adopted the view that European states are "advanced" and should assist "backward" states in Africa to become more like them. Many students struggled to fully understand Shilliam and Chitonge's critiques and their implications.

I must address one quick objection that may be raised. It could be suggested that the students are correct in thinking that Western states represent the best and highest form of political order available and that it therefore makes sense for all the world to emulate such states. It is beyond the scope of this paper for me to explain why I disagree with this claim,[4] but I should stress that the students concerned do not seem to have understood but disagreed with the more critical scholars they read. These students were not mounting a defence of the desirability of Westernisation in response to such critical scholars. That would be an acceptable thing to do in a university setting. Rather many simply do not seem to have registered or understood the critique at all.

It is difficult to speculate exactly why some students continue to hold views that seem to suggest an unreflective acceptance of Eurocentrism and coloniality, despite being exposed in the classroom to arguments against this position. It may be that some of these students opted out of really engaging with the more critical texts (and thus have not in fact been exposed to these ideas despite being enrolled in a course in which these texts are prescribed). It might be that some did not find the texts convincing but have not been able to articulate exactly why. And, of course, these kinds of comments also reflect how pervasive and entrenched coloniality is such that a single course is not easily going to disrupt it. Scholars in the postcolonial and decolonial traditions emphasise the complicated and diverse ways in which Eurocentrism and coloniality shape our thinking. It is, perhaps, overambitious to think that exposure to a few critical readings will be sufficient to shift students' perspectives in a fundamental way. Nevertheless, such exposure can play a small role in encouraging students to consider alternative ways of seeing the world.

Interaction is tentatively welcomed, but is hard to achieve and sustain

Students in general valued my attempts at making classes more interactive. However, the classes still consisted mostly of me speaking and them listening. I have found that running interactive activities is hard work in big class teaching. Students were very positive about Slido and similar tools, but such tools demand very little from students – they just type responses on their phones and then read and react to the comments of others. There were more mixed feelings about the other in-class activities I did, which required a longer, more complex engagement and direct interaction and conversation with peers. During these interventions, students typically had to reflect and write (alone or in small groups) for ten to fifteen minutes during the class and then discuss what they had written with their peers. In order to make this administratively feasible and to counter students' resistance, I assigned bonus marks for participation in these activities, organised book prizes for the best contributors, and hired an assistant to help run and administer the whole system of doing these activities and to record who had done them. This was an expensive and time-consuming alternative to the conventional style of lecturing.

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[4] A brief explanation is that I reject the idea that all societies are on the same developmental trajectory with Western countries simply being more "advanced" on a universal, linear trajectory a view espoused in mainstream development theory. Rather, I am more convinced by the arguments of dependency theorists, who show that the "development" of some parts of the world is predicated on the exploitation and marginalisation of others, and of post-development theorists and degrowth advocates, who argue that the Western model of production and consumption cannot and should not be considered a universal ideal (or, indeed, even an ideal for the West) due to the environmental damage and cultural homogenisation caused by this model. Thus, while life in the West is certainly materially safer and more comfortable, Western political and socio-economic organisation is not a meaningful model for the rest of the world.

My sense is that many students think they learn principally by listening to the lecturer and reading the course readings. Many are sceptical of the idea that they learn by actively engaging with the work by writing something down or by interacting with their peers and are reluctant to do this unless it is incentivised. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the classroom itself is not well-designed for interaction. Finally, a lot of enthusiasm and charisma is sometimes required to get students to be willing to participate. It can be tiring and is so much easier to do what students expect – talk and show PowerPoint slides!

What next?

As mentioned above, I did not succeed in getting all of my students to understand or engage with the critical readings which interrogated Eurocentric thinking. I need to work harder at finding ways to get students to engage with and understand such texts. Critical readings which interrogate the mainstream view are often more difficult and challenging for students, leading some to prefer the more mainstream texts. I should note that I do not mind if students disagree with the more critical readings and mount a sophisticated defence of mainstream comparative politics and its implicit support of Westernisation. What I do insist upon, however, is that students are aware of critiques of mainstream comparative politics and able to discuss such critiques competently. I need to consider prescribing different readings or finding ways to make the prescribed readings easier to understand and more accessible to students. Many students are missing the point I am trying to teach simply because they lack the reading and comprehension abilities or the motivation to understand the prescribed readings.

In terms of creating a more interactive learning space, I would like to continue to find new ways to encourage interactive, engaged, and critical participation in the classroom. As I acknowledge above, this is not easy and requires more time and energy than conventional lecturing, but I believe that this way of teaching is not only more effective but also more appropriate if one is trying to interrogate the effects of colonisation. This form of teaching is compatible with the idea that knowledge is something that is co-created and contested, rather than something handed from teacher to student. It is also important to contribute to broader initiatives to encourage more interactive learning (rather than just trying to change my individual courses) so that I can learn from and work with colleagues to create a different overall learning experience in my department and at my institution.

In some ways, I am reluctant to share the experiences described above because of how limited and patchy my attempts to shift the way in which students understand and engage with comparative politics were. But I think it is perhaps important to acknowledge that any attempt to respond to the call for the decolonisation of higher education will necessarily be limited, partial and flawed. As Stein (2018: 158) points out, we cannot easily see what falls outside of the dominant frames of reference within which we work such that we might not even see what needs to be done or in what ways we are perpetuating rather than challenging dominant ways of thinking. Rather than imagining that what we are doing is completely transformative and decolonial, it might be best to simply aim to "gesture toward other horizons of possibility" (Stein, 2018: 158). Arguably, more just and decolonial ways of teaching and learning will be built slowly and through a process of many errors and much hesitation. I am hopeful, therefore, that what I describe above – limited and flawed as it is – can be helpful to others who are muddling their way, like me, to trying to find better ways to engage our students. In future years, I intend to build on this small intervention in collaboration with colleagues in my department and institution. In so doing, I intend to find new ways to attend to students' views so that I can better understand their position. I also look forward to seeing further research by others describing interventions which seek to decolonise aspects of the political studies curriculum.

To conclude, creating a just world requires interrogating how knowledge is produced and taught. Knowledge can be used to perpetuate colonial ways of thinking, but it is also possible to create new forms of knowledge production which challenge coloniality and help shift power. The university classroom is one of many sites where such challenges and shifts can occur. When thinking of decolonising our university curricula, we cannot think of decolonisation as simply or principally being about the replacement of one set of readings with another or the replacement of one kind of lecturer (or student) with another. Rather, we need to think about a whole new way of approaching the creation and sharing of knowledge. Doing so is an ongoing process of thinking and rethinking how we use our time with students. This paper has described some minimal and tentative changes I have introduced into my teaching. I hope my comments can add to existing debates on the decolonisation of university curricula as we struggle together to try to find new ways of creating and sharing knowledge.

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