

# DECOLONISING HIGHER EDUCATION: POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE INVISIBLE HAND OF STUDENT POLITICS

By Wahbie Long

The writer is a Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town. He is a Mandela Mellon Fellow of the Hutchins Center at Harvard University and a member of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Indigenous Psychology. Prof Long is the author of "A History of 'Relevance' in Psychology".



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*The decolonisation movement that emerged from the 'Fees Must Fall' protests has become a home of hope for many seeking radical change in education. It has also, however, created unease among others, including students and faculty, as it has adopted a race-based rationale to press its demands. Prof Long walks us through the discipline of psychology to explain the ideas that guide*

*this movement and why it has departed from the universal principles of a coalition of people working towards a just and humane society.*

**I**n the following reflections on the decolonisation of higher education, I have three objectives. First, I intend to analyse decolonisation discourse both theoretically and experientially. I do so partly on account of what I would call its viscerality but also because lived experience is an essential category of analysis in postcolonial theory. Drawing on theoretical resources as well as several encounters with proponents of decolonisation, I argue that the politics of the decolonisation movement is in some respects deeply conservative – hence the mischievous titular reference to an 'invisible hand' directing student politics today.

Second – and because of this conservatism – I assert, with reference to the discipline of psychology, that its proposed decolonisation is clearly an ideological venture. But I also suggest that our obsession with the decolonisation discourse is to some extent unavoidable, involving what psychotherapists would call a

repetition compulsion that cannot be relinquished until the original trauma of apartheid has been mastered. And third, I draw on Marxist literary theory to problematise the disciplinary order itself and, in so doing, focus attention on a paradox that lies at the heart of the decolonising project.

I have always been distrustful of the rhetoric of decolonisation. Our inability to define what we mean by 'decolonisation' not only consigns it to a realm of pointless obscurity but also – and more importantly – frustrates our cause, which I understand to be the reimagining of the entire knowledge-making apparatus in the pursuit of a just, humane and equitable social order. The major problem with the term 'decolonisation' is, in other words, its status as an empty signifier. Whereas the post-Marxist, Ernesto Laclau (2005), considered empty signifiers essential to populist causes because they succeed – at least symbolically – in framing the political terrain, my concern is that the radical potential of decolonisation discourse – because of its indeterminacy – is always at risk of being co-opted by hegemonic political formations, a possibility analogous to what Marcuse once termed 'repressive tolerance'. We have witnessed such reversals, for example, in the fate of the so-called 'African

Renaissance,' an idiom that was meant to signify continental rebirth but was converted instead into the ideological glue that rationalised Thabo Mbeki's export of free-market economics across Africa (Louw, 2004). And we observe it in university life today with the relentless commodification of 'engaged scholarship' into just another signpost on the road to tenure.

But there is a broader context for my insistence on the careful deployment of concepts, a context best illustrated by recounting a well-known incident that scandalised the humanities in the mid-1990s. Alan Sokal, professor of physics at New York University and University College London, wrote a paper arguing that quantum gravity was a social construction. On the day the paper was published in *Social Text*, a journal for postmodern cultural studies, Sokal revealed in another outlet, *Lingua Franca*, that he had punk'd the editors of *Social Text*. He slammed his original article as a hoax, "a pastiche of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense ... structured around the silliest quotations [by postmodernist academics] I could find about mathematics and physics." His hypothesis all along had been to test whether *Social Text* would "publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions" (Sokal, 1996).

My intention in revisiting the Sokal affair is to highlight the postmodern specialty of bombast. Misleading an audience with theoretical sleights of hand is bad enough – but to do so in the name of social critique is plain bad faith. For, within academic life, there are few things more jarring than claiming to write in the service of social equality while engaging in conventions of writing of the most undemocratic kind. 'Decolonisation' is at risk of becoming another one of those radical chic terms that lends itself to obfuscation.



## **Inevitably, identity becomes the basis for political mobilisation as the possibility of universal comradeship slowly disintegrates.**

Everyone who cares about the future of higher education in South Africa is talking about it, yet most admit their cluelessness as to what it actually means.

It is no accident that the looseness of the term is consistent with the anti-foundationalist values of the intellectual tradition with which it is most closely associated, namely, postcolonial theory. Indeed, the postcolonial genre is itself difficult to master, being viewed in some quarters as not theory at all. It has been regarded, even, as a form of post-theory, which, in the view of the Marxist sociologist, Vivek Chibber, brings it close to the zone of unfalsifiability. Criticise a postcolonial writer, Chibber warns, and you may be dismissed for having misunderstood. I won't belabour the point that Marxists and postcolonial theorists are not the best of friends.

But there is a second problem with the term 'decolonisation': it seals us within a colonial imaginary (a tomb, really) in which the binaries of coloniser and colonised, white and black become impossible to displace. If we are committed to a nonracial future as enshrined in our constitution, it is difficult to imagine how that can ever be realised as long as we continue to reify certain highly contentious markers of social difference. I am of course speaking about 'race,' for despite the commonsense that it is a social

construction – that, in the words of Fanon, "the black soul is a white man's artifact" (1952/2008, p. 6) – some of us continue to believe in the fictional value of strategic essentialism. It cannot be denied that racism remains an integral part of lived experience in South Africa – but it has to be distinguished from race, which, again, has no external referent.

This brings me to the third and, possibly most serious, problem with the 'decolonisation' thesis, namely, the social vision that is its necessary consequence. In this regard, I have been struck by what I can only describe as the racial provincialism of some decolonisation supporters. I recently showed a video of a trauma room in a Khayelitsha hospital to a group of what many would call 'political' postgraduate students. The video depicted a steady stream of inebriated young men presenting with stab-wounds to all parts of their bodies. One man's leg had been amputated and disposed of in a plastic bag, another man had been stabbed in the eye, a third had been stabbed in the head. Anticipating that my students would offer a psychosocial commentary on the mayhem in a township less than 30 minutes' drive from the lecture venue, their responses left me confused. Some felt appalled by what they had seen; others commented on the contrasting 'races' of the doctors and nurses, and the white doctor's accent when addressing the black patient. One student asked me afterwards why I had shown the video in the first place. But what none of them was able to do – which is typical of metropolitan social theory – was name the material violence that prevails under conditions of material oppression.

I would like to illustrate this provincialism with a few more choice examples. Eighteen months ago, I was present at a group discussion with one of UCT's leading postcolonial voices – an expert on Biko, no less. I listened >>

in disbelief as she insinuated that Africans were blacker than coloureds and Indians. The room was well stocked with postcolonial scholars who said nothing when I objected to this almost Orwellian sentiment that some were blacker than others. No one seemed to take offence, even, at a white colleague's suggestion that black academics could be – and I quote – 'role models' for black students. With the benefit of hindsight, however, I now realise that this meeting actually initiated me into the subtleties of the postcolonial position. For I have come to appreciate that in postcolonial thought – where 'race' thinking enjoys pride of place – it is not beyond the pale that a student should demand the removal of white people from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's UCT lecture, or that radical black feminists should request the removal of white men from Ericka Huggins' public lecture. I can also understand how a Black First Land First leader can warn the South African public: "If white people attack the Guptas, we are going to defend them." And finally, I am able to comprehend how black students can sit opposite black academics – and I am referring to an open meeting of staff and students in UCT's Department of Psychology – and deny the blackness of the very academics that mentored them on the presumed grounds that the people in question are coloured and, therefore, do not count as black.

I have drawn several lessons from these incidents whose occurrences I attribute to the remarkable rise of postcolonial theory on our campuses. First, there are certain occasions when Biko's definition of 'black' applies only in theory. Second, a black monopoly capitalist is potentially defensible whereas a white monopoly capitalist is not. And third, the stabbing of black men by other black men can become irrelevant when the doctor in the ER is white. But perhaps the greatest lesson I have learnt from my encounters with

postcolonial scholars and students has to do with the importance of praxis. I now know that I am unable to reconcile myself to a theory whose practices would rehumanise some by dehumanising others. It is my fervent belief that the value of any social theory has to be measured according to the type of world it inaugurates, reminding me of a certain Jewish maxim: "I didn't come to hear the rabbi speak, I came to watch him tie his laces."

I have alluded anecdotally to the occasional pettiness of postcolonial pandering but what kind of politics does the theory actually inspire? Notwithstanding an opacity that thwarts any prospect of a straightforward answer, it would not be inaccurate to state that postcolonial theory proceeds from the premise of social difference, an insistence that underpins its trademark critiques of Eurocentrism, colonial ideology and economic determinism (Chibber, 2013). The postcolonial assertion alleges the cultural exceptionalism of the non-Western world. Theorists will argue, for example, that the history of labour



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cannot be built on materialist and rationalist assumptions, and that the lived experience of the worker in the so-called Global South is distorted when approached by universalist, Eurocentric categories of analysis. The result is an abiding suspicion of grand theory and a corresponding focus on marginality, alterity and particularity instead. Inevitably, identity becomes the basis for political mobilisation as the possibility of universal comradeship slowly disintegrates.

In this regard, the influence of postcolonial theory on student movements in South Africa has been substantial. Whether unable or unwilling to frame their struggle in terms of the universal values of dignity, security and equality, protestors have opted for the particulars of white privilege and black pain, practicing a form of identity politics that I have dismissed elsewhere as unmistakably middle-class. Trapped in a self-referential form of protest, an unmistakable narcissism has set in – I can think of no other term – as self-styled radicals reveal a decidedly un-radical preoccupation with their own bourgeois destinies. Whereas the May '68 generation pursued causes that extended far beyond the confines of the academy, to date, our students have shown little interest in backing the causes of the South African majority – most of whom will never set foot inside a university. Young people who are functionally illiterate and virtually unemployable have no interest in decolonising consciousness – let alone in resurrecting the past glories of the colour 'black'. Lest we forget everyone's favorite revolutionary, Fanon himself insists that "[t]he discovery of the existence of a black civilization in the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me. Like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment" (1952/2008, p. 175).

I am not attempting to disavow or trivialise the lived experiences of

protesting students. What they perceive more than anything is an acute sense of dislocation – a feeling of otherness that is the fate of anyone entering an institutional space that is deeply alienating. But these psychological concerns must be recognised for what they are, namely, an emergent elite’s struggle for a coherent sense of self, rather than a movement for radical social change.

I am reminded of an incident late last year when four protestors walked into my third-year clinical psychology lecture just as it was about to begin. The topic? The inaccessibility of psychological services in our country. Instead of conscientising themselves about the workings of a middle-class discipline that continues to sideline the mental health needs of non-university-going South Africans, the protestors contributed to that sidelining by shouting about how their black pain warranted the termination of the lecture.

We need to remind ourselves that the future of our country does not depend on the fate of the middle class – black or white. It depends on the millions of South Africans whose terminal state of wretchedness is both a necessary and sufficient condition for revolution. But the fact that decolonisation discourse is saturated with bourgeois concerns also tells us that something is seriously wrong with the academy. The marketisation of knowledge-making processes over the last four decades – and the gradual insertion of South African higher education institutions into that global landscape in the post-apartheid years – has resulted in the assembly-line production of graduates who are quickly assimilated into the well-oiled machineries of a market-friendly economy. Yet decolonisation activists, by and large, do not seem to take issue with the instrumentalisation of their education, directing all their energies towards the attainment of what



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they call ‘free, quality, decolonised education’. Instead of a materialist reading of the asymmetries of academic life, they support a decolonisation agenda that centres on the notion of epistemic violence, a term that refers – broadly speaking – to the subjugation of indigenous epistemologies, methodologies and knowledges.

The results can be horrifying. In UCT’s Department of Psychology, for example, some students who I can only assume have not read outside the postcolonial canon have begun insisting that the field of neuropsychology should not be taught because it does not resonate with their lived experience. What they appear to have missed is that their rendering of biological reductionism as social irrelevance overlooks the essential service that UCT’s neuropsychologists offer brain-injured and HIV-infected children from poor and working class communities. If neuropsychology were ever to be subjected to the logic of decolonisation, it is quite likely that an already inaccessible discipline would become even less accessible – but only a South African with a lived experience of grinding poverty,

concrete violence, and a resulting reliance on neuropsychological services in government hospitals would know that.

When it comes to Psychology, conversations about decolonisation reveal it to be a most troublesome discipline. The history of the field in South Africa and around the world affirms that it is only under specific social conditions that Psychology can be expected to thrive. Many postcolonial psychologists, however, approach the decolonisation of Psychology in completely ahistorical terms. Going no further than proposing certain topics of study they believe will address its Eurocentrism, they fail to offer a sustained examination of the discipline’s socially embedded character. Psychology is a distinctly modern creature that emerged from the social mayhem unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. It has become a formidable tool of social management that places particular ‘technologies of subjectivity’ at the disposal of bureaucratic and social elites who facilitate therewith the relatively smooth functioning of modern societies. It is, in other words, a discipline for followers, a discipline of the status quo. Accordingly, any talk of decolonising Psychology is inadequate without some reflection on the discipline’s coordinates within an extra-disciplinary network of power relations – a task that does not sit well with the aforementioned narcissism.

Indeed, the historian of Psychology, Kurt Danziger (1990), reminds us of the two prerequisites for discipline formation, what I shall call the epistemological and utilitarian criteria. The establishment of a discipline requires the production of knowledge in forms acceptable to established knowledge-makers as well as some guarantee of its social utility. In the case of Psychology, it has proven successful on both counts, embracing >>

a science-like cult of numbers on the one hand while ministering to the needs of educational, military and industrial elites on the other. But what this bifurcation suggests is that any attempt at rethinking the discipline has to engage with both sides of the divide. Unfortunately, the insularity of decolonisation discourse has resulted in extensive discussion of the epistemological criterion with little interrogation of the discipline's ambivalent positioning in capitalist societies. For those with Marxian inclinations, it comes as no surprise that postcolonial scholars and students of Psychology – oblivious to its social character yet convinced that there is something 'revolutionary' about the decolonisation thesis – end up accomplishing little more than the disclosure of their own bourgeois interests.

To be sure, a similar predicament confronts anyone who would equate the decolonisation of Psychology with the Africanisation of the discipline. The assumption here – and it is an assumption indebted to postcolonial thought – is that there is something special about African people that necessitates the creation of a correspondingly special Psychology. There was a time when that kind of thinking would have been dismissed as racist – but times do change. These days it has become fashionable for us Africans to write about ourselves in the third person as though we were psycho-anthropological specimens. We appear, moreover, to have little trouble talking about African ontology while quoting Fanon, despite his description of the black man's incarceration in a "zone of nonbeing" (1952/2008, p. 2). In fact, if one thinks about black men stabbing other black men, then there is surely something perverted not only about fetishised musings on Ubuntu but

also about the pursuit of "cultural questions at the very moment their erstwhile subjects [are], quite literally, vanishing from the face of the earth" (Crais, 2011, pp. 4-5).

If we are hoping to make Psychology accessible to South Africans by somehow 'Africanising' it, then we have to remember that the discipline has only ever entered the lives of people who have entered modernity. For all of our history, most South Africans have been denied the fruits of modernity and if we choose to ignore that essentially *materialist* history, then, in the words of George Santayana, we are "condemned to repeat it." It is this kind of repetition compulsion that Chibber is referencing when he asserts that, "far from landing a blow *against* colonialist and Orientalist presentations of the East, Subaltern Studies has ended up *promoting* them" (2013, p. 26, original emphases). Of course, it is equally true that this neurotic enactment of categories of trauma – black,



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white, coloured, Indian – suggests a psychological inability to give them up, pending a resolution of the original trauma. As for the shape that such a resolution should take?

I think it is probably the most burning question in public discourse today.

I would like to offer one final thought on the term 'decolonisation,' namely, its implication that the academic disciplines we have inherited remain suitable as disciplines in a society as historically contingent as ours. What I am suggesting is that it is one thing to question, for example, the form and content of Psychology, as proponents of decolonisation do, but it is another matter entirely to question the existence of Psychology altogether.

The work of the Marxist literary critic, Fredric Jameson, is of central importance to this question of what forms a discipline and, more specifically, our preoccupation with the decolonisation of higher education. For Jameson, the existence of disciplines as we know them is a symptom of our estrangement under late capitalism: the economist understands matters in one way, the sociologist views them in another light, while the psychologist brings a new perspective altogether. In Jameson's view, these false specialisations are a testament to a fallen social reality that was once whole and indivisible but has now splintered in countless directions. To speak of a decolonised 'psychology' or a decolonised 'economics,' is to endorse a disciplinary regime that only exists because of the alienation that permeates our lives today. Located at the heart of the decolonisation project, this is a paradox not easily dispelled.

The real tragedy, however, is to be found on the left, where internecine conflicts among academics and students – both internationally and in South Africa – have meant that even



socialists and anti-racists can be put down as conservative and racist.

Apart from its provincialism, the idea that only black people may speak for black people, that only women may speak for women, that only disabled people may speak for disabled people, that only disabled black women may speak for disabled black women – in short, the idea that only the oppressed may speak for the oppressed – is surely one of the most dangerous ideas in circulation today. It denies the possibility of empathy – of a shared humanity – something that, as a practicing psychotherapist, I can never agree with. Nearly every religion, culture and ethical tradition in the history of our species has advocated some version of the Golden Rule: treat others as you wish to be treated, and do not treat others as you do not wish to be treated. Yet the realisation of that principle requires an appreciation not only of one's own mind but also the

minds of others. Postcolonial theory effectively denies the latter possibility – and it is for that reason that it cannot provide the moral vision we need now more than ever.

On the basis of my lived experience, then, decolonisation discourse is not as radical as it claims to be. It forms the ideological superstructure of an identity project that resonates powerfully with the interests of an emerging social elite, but its revolutionary credentials are far from clear. This much is evident when decolonisation discourse is applied to the special case of Psychology where it fails to problematise the ambiguous role of the discipline in modern, capitalist societies. And as for the disciplinary order in general, the working assumptions of decolonisation discourse lead it to endorse rather than interrogate the alienation so characteristic of capitalist social formations. Is Marxism, the New

Left, or post-Marxism the answer? I don't know. What I do know, is that when it comes to debates about transformation, our terms of reference have to expand beyond the self-serving particulars of postcolonial theory.

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