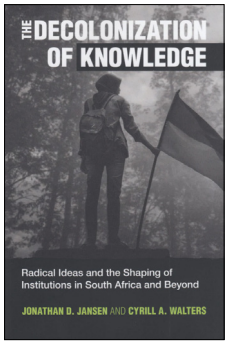
The challenges of institutionalising decolonization of the curriculum in South Africa

BOOK TITLE:
The decolonization of knowledge: Radical ideas and the shaping of institutions in South Africa and beyond



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This is an important and unique scholarly contribution on the popular theme of decolonization of knowledge with a focus on South Africa, a country that became the site of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, which shook the higher education landscape in 2015 and 2016. Unlike Olufemi Taiwo's *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*[1], which was published at the same time as Jansen and Walters' book and that sought to dismiss the very project of decolonization, this book takes the debate to the level of how the radical idea of decolonization made its way through institutions of higher education in South Africa. It is a work of serious scholarly engagement, not easy and opportunistic dismissal of decolonization – a battle cry that has assumed a planetary scale. It is not a polemic work like many other works amongst the fast-growing literature on decolonization and decoloniality. It is a detailed empirical study grounded in carefully executed fieldwork involving 10 institutions of higher education with over 200 academics interviewed.

Deploying the conceptual frames of sociology of knowledge and institutional/neo-institutional theory, it also offers nuanced critical reflections of the complex politics of knowledge and operations of power within the higher education sector. Of course, one can say that studying the journey of decolonization within universities from well-known theoretical frameworks such as neo-institutional theory and conventional curriculum theory is in a way part of defanging, dilution and technicalization of the revolutionary idea of decolonization. But at the same time, one has to consider that the two authors are educationists working with conventional curriculum theories and using them to make sense of the trajectories of decolonization across 10 selected universities. But what distinguishes the book under review from most of the existing works on decolonization of knowledge is that it is not a fast-paced theoretical intervention, and in this way, it escapes the pitfalls of generalizations and lack of nuance. It is a clearly focused work on decolonization of the curriculum and the concomitant challenges and politics of an institutional nature.

Therefore, if the rich and ever-expanding literature on the resurgent and insurgent decolonization of the 21st century (also known as decoloniality) has enabled us to understand the topicality of the return of decolonization in the present conjuncture, the book under review takes us into how the radical idea of decolonization is received, consumed, made sense of, diluted, defanged, institutionalised and disciplined and routinized into existing structures and institutions of the university. The book is well organised into eight chapters. The first chapter provides the introduction and articulates the historical context, definitions of working concepts such as curriculum, knowledge content, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge authorities as well as working theories such as sociology of knowledge, politics of knowledge (micropolitics of knowledge), curriculum theory and institutional/neo-institutional theory. The first chapter also explains the methodological approach adopted. Already in the introductory chapter Jansen and Walters warn the reader about "how institutions quarantine radical ideas" (p. 21).

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Institutional Posturing: The Coming of Decolonization and the Scramble to Respond'. This is a revealing title which is very loud on what happens when a radical idea of decolonization enters universities, or for that matter any institution. Institutional posturing is a time-tested strategy of how institutions weather oppositional ideas through incorporating, disciplining and aligning them to the status quo, as the institution gives itself a new lease of life. Jansen and Walters provide empirical details on how 10 universities deployed institutional posturing to pacify student movements on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to dilute and defang decolonization from a revolutionary force into a reformism similar to the long-standing discourse transformation. Institutional posturing took various forms, ranging from setting up task teams, sponsoring workshops, and university senates to defanging decolonization. The other technique was that of "enclaving" and making those committed to decolonizing the curriculum exist as a "township within a city". The third chapter provides "micropolitics of knowledge" that shaped and drove the institutionalization decolonization of the curriculum. In Chapter 4, Jansen and Walter argue that the lack of a clear definition of decolonization opened floodgates to the institutional strategies of quarantining of radical ideas. Drawing from the 10 universities studied, they also map out seven different threads of meaning for decolonization: addition of content, Africanization, good teaching, remediation, critical pedagogy, no change, and appropriation.

The fifth chapter highlights that internal micro-institutional politics of knowledge have to be read in tandem with external regulating agencies (SAQA, CHE, DHET) that also play a role in the disciplining and defanging of decolonization. In Chapters 6 and 7, Jansen and Walters once again provide empirical details of selected academics that positively responded to the call and demand for decolonization of the curriculum but their efforts suffered "enclaving". The last chapter comes back to the politics of knowledge and there is critical distillation of various ways through which universities responded to radical decolonization of curriculum ideas, ranging from posturing, diluting, bureaucratizing, disciplining, regulating, marginalising to domesticating them. Among the case studies, one would have expected to find the University of South Africa (UNISA), which for a long time prior to #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, had been the site of generation and advocacy for decolonization/decoloniality, with the UNISA Annual Decoloniality School having existed since 2014. UNISA has also been a site of Africanization for a long time. One wonders why such an institution did not attract the authors of this book. It is such neglect of this important institution that led to some factual inaccuracies in this book, for example, Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) was formed in 2011, long before links were established with the Barcelona International Decoloniality Summer School in Spain. It was a homegrown idea by concerned UNISA scholars committed to decolonization.

This critique does not minimise the importance of this book. Published seven years after the whirlwind of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, this book underscores that universities in South Africa could not just ignore

the demands and calls for change, rather the institutions evolved complex but well-known institutional behavioural strategies of killing radical ideas while pretending to be implementing them. Implementesis can be the best term to capture the crisis whereby radicals expect conservatives to implement radical ideas and fail to read into posturing as a survival strategy of institutions facing hurricanes of change.

Jansen and Walters nearly spoil their excellent work when they degenerate into the usual position of trying to dismiss decolonization as "language of replacement", "language of lament" and "language of nostalgia" (p. 234–236), after having empirically demonstrated that the problem was institutional posturing and enclaving of those who positively embraced decolonization of the curriculum. There is also a complacent view of the resilient powerful political economy of knowledge, which like the posturing of universities is also playing the same strategy to perpetuate itself. It is from the decolonial scholars that such concepts as mosaic epistemologies, ecologies of knowledges and intercultural translation come, which gesture into the future of knowledge. To dismiss decolonization as discourse of succumbing to victimhood and to be blind to global coloniality, which is all over and not over, is to deliberately distort and minimise a planetary revolutionary phenomenon. Needless to say, decolonization is not a singular school of thought, and like other bodies of thought there are conservative, moderate and radical elements.

In the closing pages of the book, Jansen and Walters admit that decolonization is necessary: "However, for universities to deliver on the curriculum change project, a new radicalism is required that takes institutional analysis seriously as a point of departure for the decolonization of knowledge" (p. 238). How can one believe in "decolonization of knowledge" while dismissing decolonization? Jansen and Walters' book is a good example of how to take decolonization forward with the hindsight of learning and unlearning from the consequences of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. The key lesson learned being that we should never trust the institutions when they pretend to be decolonizing themselves from the inside – we have to find ways to do decolonization better and more robustly – *Aluta continua*! Decolonization is a struggle. It is not an event. It has no ready-made blueprints.

Reference

1. Taiwo O. Against decolonization: Taking African agency seriously. London: Hurst Publishers; 2022.