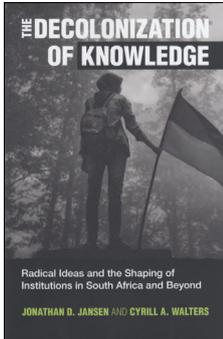




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The decolonization of knowledge: Radical ideas and the shaping of institutions in South Africa and beyond



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Beyond rhetoric: A review of *The Decolonization of Knowledge*

These days, with so many topics, fields, and disciplines being presented for decolonization, one can be forgiven for asking if there is any other game in town. Jonathan Jansen and Cyrill Walters' new book, *The Decolonization of Knowledge: Radical Ideas and the Shaping of Institutions in South Africa and Beyond*, is a refreshing attempt at making sense of this 'decolonial turn', in part because it moves decolonization discourse past the 'intellectually vapid, self-congratulatory' antics that have come to typify aspects of it (p. 231).

It helps, therefore, that the book constitutes an *empirical* study as it tracks the academic uptake of the call for decolonization in 10 public institutions of higher learning in South Africa. More than 200 academics were interviewed; curriculum documents were analysed; institutional records – consisting variously of mandates, terms of reference, concept documents, commissioned reports, and management reports – were examined; while officials from external regulatory agencies – specifically, the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), and the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) – were consulted too, mainly in the form of focus group discussions.

It is of course impossible to dissect in a thousand words every finding of such a richly conceived study. Instead, I shall focus on three of its key conclusions: first, decolonization has no fixed meaning; second, no matter the sound and fury, institutions live longer than ideas; and third, therefore, institutional analysis becomes critically important if the decolonization movement is to avoid morphing into just another endless series of talk shops.

The indeterminacy of the term 'decolonization' is consistent with Ernesto Laclau's² description of *empty signifiers*. On the one hand, the openness to all manner of projections runs the risk of diluting whatever radical potential the word may have. Yet this discursive quality is invaluable to populist causes because it allows for the structuring of contested political terrain in compelling ways. While supporters of decolonization are dismissed often for their reliance on an opaque language of critique in the absence of concrete alternative proposals – "just tell me what decolonization is", says one lecturer, "and I will do it" (p. 90) – one should not overlook the larger strategy, a feature of which is simply to disrupt business as usual, to force the breaking of strides. Even so, it is hard to disagree with Jansen and Walters' contention that, because it ends up meaning all things to all comers, decolonization is easily "defanged" (p. 67). After all, "if decolonization could mean anything, it also meant nothing" (p. 73).

Victor Hugo, to be sure, once opined that "an invasion of armies can be resisted but not an idea whose time has come". Nonetheless, the power of an idea is not necessarily commensurate with its lifespan. Jansen and Walters catalogue an armamentarium of tactics that institutions deploy, effectively exhausting the idea of decolonization by sapping it of vitality and momentum. In the chapter, "How Does a Radical Curriculum Idea Travel through Institutional Life?", they describe how universities can posture, dilute, bureaucratize, discipline, regulate, marginalize, and domesticate radical ideas. This is a subtle process in which institutions can neutralize ideas precisely *because* they seem willing to accommodate them. Herbert Marcuse's³ concept of *repressive tolerance* is apposite, with institutions managing undesirable ideas by letting them enter through the proverbial front door. Writing about one university in particular, Jansen and Walters show how the mainstreaming of the decolonization agenda meant that "the chances of radical change to the curriculum were muted" (p. 38).

All of which points to the importance of institutional analysis: if the decolonization movement is to make meaningful inroads into university life, then focusing on curriculum reviews will not cut it for as long as the *institutional curriculum* – those invisible rules that determine what counts as knowledge – remains settled. This leads Jansen and Walters to conclude that, "[i]n South Africa, at least, decolonization of the curriculum did not fail to be taken up in institutions because it was too radical. The problem was that it was not radical enough" (p. 238).

When *The Decolonization of Knowledge* was launched at Stellenbosch University, a troubling question arose: "how do you decolonize in an unequal society?" While it does not fall within the ambit of Jansen and Walters' book, the question does remind one at the very least that the gown is not the town. Students and professors do get excited at new academic trends and, as per Sayre's law, the bitterness of university politics has much to do with the stakes being relatively low. At the risk of idealizing higher education, most young South Africans do not make it onto university campuses while many of those who do, will not finish their degrees. What is more, the corporate ethic that is overtaking tertiary institutions brings into focus powerful structural factors outside universities – against the constraints of which they must survive. Equally deserving of analysis, then, is the 'societal curriculum' that decides the parameters of institutional ones.

On more than one occasion, Jansen and Walters decry the "arcane... language of the high humanities" (p. 216) that marks out certain influential streams in the decolonization movement. Why an intelligentsia identified with the political left goes out of its way to obfuscate and alienate with a type of academic Scrabble that produces "a decolonial Tower of Babel" (p. 217) is something of a mystery. There is an anti-democratic impulse at the heart of such theory and it is surely no coincidence that its praxis – in the shape of certain Fallist spectacles – has been criticized on similar grounds.¹ If it is to realize its radical ambitions, then the decolonization movement must democratize thoroughly its theories, practices, and, indeed, its areas of concern.

Jansen and Walters have done the South African academy a great service by stripping back the mystique and probing the contours, pathways, and possible futures of the decolonial turn in a straightforward and scholarly manner. *The Decolonization of Knowledge* is a rewarding read for anyone seeking to understand this significant moment in the world of higher education.

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