Decolonisation of Knowledge Production and Knowledge Transmission in the Global South: Stalled, Stagnated or Full Steam Ahead?

By:

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On the Question

The question of whether decolonisation stalled in the Global South has been addressed in some form for as long as the concept of decolonisation has been present in our world. As many educational institutions across the world, and especially in the Global North, begin to include ‘decolonising’ in their knowledge transmission agendas, connecting this question with the past, present and future of all aspects of the colonial project has never been more important. This short essay argues firstly that the question itself relies on certain presumptions that should be revisited. Secondly, the essay argues that

the answer itself is complex and depends on where our gaze primarily lies – state or people.

The question we are attempting to answer is predicated on the presumption that decolonisation has occurred and may now have stalled. Therefore, the answer to that question is itself dependent on whether we consider colonisation itself to be merely a physical and administrative project or also an epistemic one. Also, whether this epistemic nature of the colonial project was an incidental or rather an integral part of colonisation. Mignolo, in particular, argues that the colonial project was driven by supplanting one knowledge system over all others. Or as Boaventura de Sousa Santos explains, the colonial project was reliant on massive epistemicides – the killing of ways of knowing and being, that lay on the other side of the abyssal line… in other words what we may call, for our purposes here, in the Global South. 'Killing' here is achieved by replacing different ways of knowing with one way of knowing, which is then considered superior and therefore universal. This framing of colonisation is especially pertinent when we ask if the processes of knowledge production and transmission have become trapped in what one may consider to be an overarching structure of stalled decolonisation. This is because, if one considers colonisation to merely be the overseas administration of colonies, then decolonisation occurs at independence with the replacement of the foreign administrators with local administrators. However, because it is widely accepted that colonisation included not just political administration but also relied upon economic and knowledge hegemonies and dependencies, I agree with Nkrumah's argument, colonisation did not end; it changed form but not ideology. Therefore, decolonisation in terms of knowledge structures can be said, at the very least, to have stalled. But then there are other non-statist structures that can be observed, especially in the sphere of knowledge production, where innovation continues to happen beyond the centre – in the creative, business and technology sectors, for example. Nevertheless, it is in the question of whether these innovations can successfully break away from the Global North-dependent capitalist centre that I think the answers lie as to what the state of play is in decolonisation of knowledge production in the Global South.

A Short Aside on Decolonisation and Who Determines the Global South

For the coloniser, decolonisation serves the purpose of keeping what has been gained without the extra expense of continually administering colonies. [El-Enany makes an argument for this in her book, *Bordering Britain: Law, race and empire*.] Depending on which section of the colonised one considers however, the purposes of decolonisation range from ideas of freedom or justice, to an opportunity to occupy the privileged position of the departing colonisers. Ekeh's concept of two publics in Africa illustrates the public schism caused by colonialism into an outward-facing and an inward-facing public. One could thus argue that both colonisation and purported decolonisation, suggest ruptures and continuities of purpose and place that do not exist, or are brought about by the suggestion of rupture or continuity themselves.

Thus, while I accept that the Global South is a concept that we all use and collectively understand, there are power and positional complexities in the identifying the Global South as a homogenous entity. These serve to obscure the power implications in who gets to declare a region decolonised or designated as Global South. Such terminology often obscures regions within this designation which operate as sites of exploitative labour and consumption which are contingent on the Global North's primitive accumulation. In other words, the Global North and South are co-constitutive of each other. Or as Olaniyan says, in explaining why African poverty is predicated on Euro-modern extraction and accumulation, *'it is absolutely ridiculous to think that Congo is not modern, but Belgium is...'* alluding here to Belgium's colonial reign of terror in what was called the Belgian Congo. Thus, these zones are closer than the geographical global North-South demarcation suggests. Grosfoguel argues that they overlap, with both the designated North and South containing within them zones of being and zones of non-being. Thus, in this essay, my treatment of the Global South attempts to be alive to these complexities especially in how they affect knowledge production. Consequently, I use the phrase 'designated Global South,' to reflect the power to name – either the moment of decolonisation or a space as Global South.

Stalled Decolonisation of Knowledge?

Colonisation was operationalised by and as an epistemic project. Therefore, knowledge hierarchies and epistemicides formed a major mechanism by which colonisation was achieved – at home and abroad. Not a by-product. The

consequence of the encounter between coloniser and the colonised was to establish thereafter the parameters for global power and the gateway of acceptable language, knowledge, jurisprudence and thought. The effects of this encounter are illustrated not only in knowledge systems that were destroyed at the time of encounter, but also in the structure and method by which knowledge is transferred in the 'Global South' after the colonial encounter. For example, language in education, education institutionalisation and certification. The overall result is an overwhelming silence about indigenous knowledge systems as they continue to be replaced and subjugated by the knowledge systems introduced by the colonial project. It is these same colonial knowledge systems that subjugated knowledges in what is designated the Global South, that are being relied upon to reignite the fires of decolonisation.

Thus, the starting position of the anticolonial postcolonial wishing to decolonise knowledge and education and carry on the work of decolonisation is inherently limited. For example, on African continent, at independence, there were attempts to decolonise knowledge, as well as more generally improve standards in education. Inadequate personnel and research impeded continental efforts to reform curricula, while international efforts continue to be contextually uninformed, sporadic, and isolated. Furthermore, the Structural Adjustment Programmes introduced to Africa by international financial institutions in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in massive reductions to governmental spending on education. Global North-South collaborations in these efforts, are often encumbered by comparatively higher costs of travel, gatekeeping practices, harmful partnership practices, difficulties in obtaining visas or visiting fellowships etc. This continuing epistemic violence is indicative of stalled, or even non-existent decolonisation. Decolonisation of knowledge production and transmission is thus caught in a bind. The 'Global South' intellectual lacks the structural capacity to adequately represent silenced voices, while even the well-intentioned 'Global North' intellectual runs the risk of distorting knowledge while 'speaking for'… Spivak explains this process in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.

The use of language in education in the Global South also illustrates the stagnation of the decolonial project, as schooling is often done in European languages. Wa Thiong'o is famed for making the point that many African literature prizes only recognise works in a European language. Consequently,

this means that in many areas designated ‘Global South’, education structures do not operate to assist knowledge production, as learners simultaneously struggle with language and text; doubling the mental effort required to learn. Furthermore, this use of language has contributed to the disappearance of indigenous languages. Inadvertently, the ability to speak a colonial language influences the measure of success attainable. In other words, social mobility is more likely for those who can speak an European language, than for those that speak their indigenous languages only. This explains why, across the African continent, but most especially in South Africa, there are increasingly vocal arguments for decolonisation to include use of indigenous languages in education.

As Paulo Freire argues, ‘*Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes “the practice of freedom”, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.’* I suggest that education in the designated Global South, as I have summarised above is NOT the practice of freedom, as it is quite closely linked to the logic of the colonial system of epistemicides and not transformation of the world.

Decolonial Progress?

Despite the above, it is vital to note that there are ways in which decolonisation has not entirely stalled… in the informal economy, in intra-continental and trans-Diasporic communication. The beauty of the informal economy is that it reflects everyday realities and is divorced from the statist structures and strictures of neo-liberalism. The informal economy involves practices, knowledge and values that are related to, and grow out of, local and community circumstances. Some of these are linked to knowledge systems that were nearly wiped out during the overt colonial encounter. Traditional practices relating to orthography, environmental conservation, health and beauty, music and art, finances and self-help still exist today. On the other hand, the dominant discourse is that indigenous practices are outmoded, archaic and out of tune with modernity. Yet, these practices, as they are engaged with today, are not trapped in time, but have evolved in tandem with society’s many

iterations. Thus, while cross-continental and precolonial trade routes mostly no longer exist, Africans have found new ways to communicate and share knowledge about art, music, writing and science that often bypass the state structures imposed by colonisation. These forms of knowledge production and transmission may not be curated or valued by the 'Global North', but they exist. And knowledge is being exchanged and produced in new ways. For example, as Siyanda Mohutsiwa states quite succinctly, social media has finally given Pan-Africanism a new voice.

The Hope of a Decolonial Tomorrow?

Going forward, we need to consider who should be at the forefront of restarting areas of stalled decolonisation, and what decolonisation should achieve in what is designated the Global South. In the ideas of stalled decolonisation, we see the conflation of seemingly similar but actually distinct ideologies and aspirations. There is some underlying presumption than **post**colonial states, peoples and populations will inevitably be **anti**colonial. As if the passage of time will of itself repudiate what has gone before. Contradictorily, postcolonial states often tend to be nearly as colonial as the colonies that preceded them, relying as they do on the same systems of production, international relationships, political structures and definitely the same knowledge systems of production – both in content and structure. Thus, if the 'Global North' and leaders in the 'Global South' are left to drive decolonisation, it will inevitably stall as imperialism inexorably reproduces itself. However, one hopes that if the people who are most affected – those at the grassroots, at the coalface, locked in crowded garment factories and below the earth in unsafe mines – drive decolonisation based on their aspirations, then it is possible that decolonisation will move from being post- to anti-colonial. One hopes.

My last reflection is: what would we consider to be successful and complete decolonisation? Development on par with the 'Global North?' Democratic states modelled to mimic those of the 'Global North?' Knowledge production and transmission, as the practice of freedom requires more than low-level and intermittent transnational engagement on counter-normative platforms. It requires engagement with the informal sector that moves beyond speaking for and distorting aspirations. It requires theoretical, radical and critical thought of what freedom actually looks like through the eyes of those who aspire to true freedom.

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