

Academic activism as decolonial reparation

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Abstract

While widely lauded and welcomed by most, South Africa's transition to a democracy has not succeeded in ridding its educational spaces from the ills of race-based politics. Instead new assemblages have formed to ensure the continuing marginalisation of 'black' academics in historically 'white' universities. In response, this paper looks at academic activism, not only as expressions of responsible action and resistance, but as enactments of decolonisation. It argues that decolonisation does not only pertain to political, social, economic change. It also needs an unmaking and re-making of what it means to be and act with humanity. To this end, the histories, identities and knowledge of academics can play a profound role not only in shaping the resistance within academic activism. The point is, that who academics are, and how they have *become* academics are as important to the academic project, as what they do.

Full paper

Despite the widespread educational reform, which accompanied South Africa's transition to a democracy, educational spaces continue to be fraught with unresolved historical tensions and misrecognitions of race, culture, ethnicity, religion and language. Notions of democratisation, especially in higher education, continue to be trapped in increasingly misleading narratives of massification of students and representation of academics. Simmering beneath it all are misplaced beliefs that the ideological dismantling of apartheid has given rise to a democracy, which are seemingly irreconcilable with any ideas of activism and resistance. For some, it would seem that the arrival of democracy, as captured in reams of policy reform, underscored by an undisputed liberal Constitution, nullifies the need for any further Struggle. And yet, as is evident by the annual waves of student protests – from fees-must-fall to Rhodes-must-fall campaigns – the profound inequalities which persist in the lived experiences of students as they navigate historically 'white' and off-limits institutions, the Struggle is far from over. If anything, the country's transition to a democracy has amplified the demands for the far-reaching reform and restoration that were often used to entice students into the Struggle against apartheid.

Unsurprisingly, the same experiences of displacement, marginalisation and exclusion conveyed by students, are encountered among academics. Like students, they too, are traversing into unfamiliar spaces, cultures and discourses, and finding that appointments into academic positions is hardly a passage into the internal functioning or character of certain universities. In fact, they soon realise that at some historically 'white' institutions, notions of transformation are forged only in policy – reminding me

of Ahmed's (2006) contention, that policies are used as proof that universities are *doing* something about diversity and equity, so that diversity is judged in terms of what the document states, rather than what the university actually *does*. Hence, while it might be true that apartheid has been disassembled, its assemblages are being reconfigured and camouflaged so that othering in all its multifaceted manifestations have taken renewed root in both universities and schools. This begins to explain the unrelenting calls for decolonisation and Africanisation, as hopeful paradigms of release and liberation, in ways that South Africa's democracy has failed to deliver.

The interest of this paper is to revisit the criticality of academic activism as a vehicle of disruption, necessary for the emergence of a decolonial society. My argument takes for granted Noam Chomsky's (1967) declaration, that 'IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies'. Here, the injunction is not only to seek and utter truth, but also to resist the propagation of lies, which so often accompanies injustices. Importantly, cultivating a university of resistance relies on the extent to which universities are critically conscious of the ways in which the world works, and which norms are used in the propagation of domination, exclusion, and oppression. Unless there is an open awareness of how the world can be distorted to support the ideologies of some, while discarding the rights of others, there will be no need to resist. Resistance, therefore, can only emerge once we comprehend Santos' (2018, p. 1) contention that 'We live in a period in which the most repugnant forms of social inequality and social discrimination are becoming politically acceptable'. This critical consciousness should be embedded in the pedagogical practices of universities, so that university spaces become shaped and influenced by a pedagogy of resistance. I see practices of resistance and activism as central to the discourse of decolonisation.

Decolonisation does not only pertain to political, social, economic change (Davids & Waghid, 2021). It also demands, states Mamdani (2016: 79), epistemological rethinking, so that we might 'make, unmake and remake, and thereby apprehend, the world'. Decolonisation has as much to do with a recognition of indigenous epistemologies as it has to do with a recognition and restoration of 'black' lives (XXX, 2021). And in this regard, the personal identities, values, knowledge and worldviews of academics can play a profound role not only in shaping the resistance within academic activism. The point is, that who academics are, how they have *become* academics are as important to the academic project, as what they do. The identities and stories of academics hold the potential for unmaking and remaking not only the higher education space, but also for students, as they move in and out of the university. At the centre of decolonisation are desperate needs not only for an erasure of othering and marginalisation, but for a reclaiming of what it means to be human.

References

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