

The public good of higher education and the contemporary decolonial turn in South Africa (0154)

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The paper sets out to consider the public good of higher education in terms of the specificity of South Africa and the ‘decolonial turn’ driven by country-wide university student protests beginning in 2015. Of course, debates regarding decolonization are not new and can be traced back at least to the Bandung conference in 1955. The paper considers arguments advanced for higher education as a public good but then focuses on how the public good might look, or look different if framed in decolonial terms. Recent debates have variously understood the public good of higher education as ranging from the economic to the social, to the democratic space of critical reasoning (Guzman-Valenzuela 2015; Marginson 2011), and from a private benefit in the economic and social mobility of individuals, to a public-private hybrid benefitting both individuals and society collectively through contributions to knowledge, to the good of others and to social change. The public good might also be understood to include more justice inside universities themselves. In the light of current South African decolonial turn - understood as a continuing historical process but with a specific contemporary manifestation focusing primarily on free higher education and a decolonised curriculum - I propose that drawing on decolonial ideas (Franz Fanon in particular) can help us rethink the public-good of higher education and society. This turns on two overlapping decolonial challenges, that of equality and that of being human.

1) Firstly, the ‘decolonial public good’ turn must be a turn to challenging inequality: material, existential (Therborn, 2013) and distinctively for higher education, of knowledge. In South Africa there have been real gains post 1994 in terms of a range of socio-economic benchmarks; nonetheless, grave inequality persists with a gini co-efficient of a round .66. Moreover, better-off, mostly white but also including a black middle class, South Africans are able to transfer privilege, ‘banking’ material, intellectual and social capital. Fanon (1967), however, reminds us of the need for the redistribution of wealth (in this case higher education might be one such mechanism), or humanity ‘will be shaken to pieces’. The current student argument for free higher education does not make sense in a context of wealth gaps but free higher education for poorer students does. Given his criticism of national middle class ruling elites and the limits of nationalism as ‘food for the masses’, Fanon argues that the national government should act not out of its narrow middle class interests but ‘ought to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcast and by the outcasts’, and ‘give back dignity to all citizens’. This aligns with the argument for universities to educate ‘public-good professionals’ committed to human development and well-being freedoms in society and especially for those who do not access higher education (Walker and McLean 2013). A decolonial public good would further require that higher education contribute to students’ equality of capabilities and agency (Sen, 2009) to function fully as human beings, working to transform inequality arrangements across intersecting axes of ‘resource inequality’ and ‘existential inequality’ of personhood (recognition, association, status and power) (Therborn, 2013). Beyond this a decolonial public good would challenge knowledge inequalities, including how we advance the decolonial public good against the significant inequalities that feature in relation to the political economy of global higher education, what Naidoo (2016) has called the ‘competition fetish’ influencing the day to day practices of knowledge work in research, teaching and community engagement. Fanon (1967, 78) urged the ‘Third World’ (global South) to do its utmost to find ‘their own particular values and methods and style

which will be peculiar to them'. Universities South Africa (2015) has pointed to the ideological construction of the post-apartheid university system, which it argues needs to be contested and not arranged along lines which put competition and 'mimicking' a European or North American ideal of the university over a commitment to tackling the deep-seated issues of African development, and a wider cosmopolitan and democratic internationalism. This is especially challenging because no nation or university system can go it alone in the globalized higher education landscape. Decolonization would also challenge inequalities of knowledge production to promote 'cognitive justice' (de Sousa Santos 2006), both the knowledge featured in the pedagogical space of the decolonized curriculum (and see point 2 below), and how knowledge is produced in and across universities, whose knowledge counts, and how knowledge shapes inequalities and unevenness of development between universities and between the global South and the global North. Clearly setting out what the decolonized university would look like is hard. Which bits do we keep and why, and how do we refashion something not in thrall to Northern dominance in funding and knowledge production? Where could we start?

2) Secondly, a decolonial public good would transform our understanding of what it means to be truly human and how higher education can release (or constrain) the possibilities of human existence and history imprisoned by the colonization of human experience and the racialization of consciousness (Fanon, 1967). For Fanon (1967) the moment of decolonization is an absolute beginning on which we may write a new account [of the public good and higher education] in imagining a truly postcolonial humanity, liberated from the political, ontological and intellectual legacies of western imperialism. Through our higher education actions we can remake the human world as an ethical project, expanding solidarity and personal and collective change away from individualistic values brought by colonialism and rejected by Fanon, the same values which underpin the neo-colonial university project. As Fanon (1967) writes, such values mean 'my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on'. The decolonial public good would advance egalitarian modes of public reasoning as a political project of human dignity, equality and participation in democratic life in the university and beyond. It would fashion reason out of rage, as well challenging colonial distortions. Fanon reminds us that good reasoning is fundamental to the decolonization project and hence a challenge to teaching and governance processes in our universities, and to our relationships (including research and knowledge) with other universities nationally, continentally and internationally.

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