ON COLONIALITY/DECOLONIALITY IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND SOCIETIES

By Henning Melber
Extraordinary Professor, Centre for Gender and Africa Studies/University of the Free State

Social organisations tend to be based on asymmetric power relations – almost always, almost everywhere. Inequality characterises interaction both within and between societies. Class-based hierarchies, peppered with gender imbalances, sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and many other forms of discrimination, are the order of the day, both nationally and internationally. Colonial power structures and mindsets (understood as a hierarchical system imposing normative values that exclude and discriminate) almost always remain an integral part of any form of social reproduction, even when we believe that colonialism (as a system in which foreign powers occupy and execute rule over other territories and people) is a thing of the past. Following such broad understanding, social reproduction tends to maintain inherently colonial structures, and individuals remain colonised subjects.

Educational systems as the institutionalised form of knowledge transmission are substantial elements of social reproduction. They execute colonial functions in the sense of domestication by affirmatively entrenching dominant value systems and norms for internalisation. While being a student at the German Private School in Windhoek during the apartheid days in the late 1960s, Namibia was a South African occupied colony. The manager of the local branch of an international bank displayed the slogan 'knowledge is power'. I only realised its true meaning much later – that certain knowledge is power, and that the definition of power is the decisive element. Put differently: Not everything that is based on knowledge counts, and not everything that counts is based on knowledge. The knowledge transmitted has cultivated the firm justification of inequalities as a naturally given order. Colonial racist knowledge in the perpetuation of white supremacy – barbarism taken for granted as a form of civilisation.

Subsequent decolonisation was in the main understood as a formal process of political change, taking over institutions without questioning their invisible hand. While curricula have been adapted to new political realities, the transmission of knowledge and the function of education as a process to instil loyalty into official discourses – and by implication into the system established as the new social order – and those in power and control have not changed. At a colloquium on 'Decolonising the University' held at the University of the Free State in October 2017, the Zimbabwean scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni advocated a pedagogy of unlearning "as part of epistemological decolonisation which results in the removal of that colonial/Eurocentric hard disc of coloniality together with its software".

But given the complexities of existing power structures, our own affirmative involvement – more often than we realise – is determined by the mere position we occupy and the role we execute. Being part of formal socialisation processes in a given society bears the risk of being instrumental in a process of domestication. Coloniality, as Walter Mignolo and others insist,

is a project transcending but not eradicating Western universal rule. As he explained in an interview in 2017, it "requires actors and institutions, and actors and institutions conserve, expand, change the structure of knowledge, but within the same matrix: the colonial matrix of power".

Post-colonial societies continue to reproduce colonial elements. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire already considered the entrenchment of a deposit and 'banking knowledge' as the main effect of formal educational processes. Following such an approach, the change from foreign colonial rule to a local government does not automatically signal post-coloniality. As Wahbie Long from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town observed: "Decolonisation seals us within a colonial imaginary in which the binaries of coloniser and colonised, white and black become impossible to displace." For him, "decolonisation activists, by and large, do not seem to take issue with the instrumentalisation of their education … Instead of a materialist reading of the asymmetries of academic life, they support a decolonisation agenda that centres on the notion of *epistemic* violence" (his emphasis). Such discourse, however, "forms the ideological superstructure of an identity project". The focus on epistemic violence runs the risks of reducing – if not ignoring – the underlying dimensions of material facts and realities.

Decolonisation remains a work in progress and requires more than a focus on curricula. Addressing institutional racism, which is understood as racism in certain institutions, is a necessary but not sufficient step. Fundamental transformation of societies must embrace all forms of discrimination and 'othering', but also material aspects of transformation. The removal of the Rhodes statue from the campus of the University of Cape Town was (like many similar interventions elsewhere), despite some controversial militancy of related protests, a legitimate initiative.

But do the students who pass the site on their way to the upper campus now achieve better learning and exam results than before Cecil John Rhodes was removed? Or does the beggar on a street of which the apartheid name has been replaced by that of an African freedom fighter now enjoy a better life? This is not meant to be polemic but serves more as a cautious reminder: if we lose sight of the fundamentals that shape societies beyond symbols (while symbols do matter, of course), we might take the means to an end for the end – and fail in our efforts towards true decolonisation. Decoloniality not only requires challenging epistemic imprisonment and mental slavery. It also has to support social struggles and create relationships that can nurse decolonisation in material aspects.