



The GAPS Think Piece - Issue 17

A decolonial perspective on diversity

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Introduction

Is diversity a good thing? I guess the community of GAPS will resolutely answer: "Yes, of course." After all, the mission statement says that GAPS want to "promote equality of access to post-secondary education for minorities and indigenous peoples around the world as well as inclusive campuses."

My answer is: it depends on how diversity is related to decolonizing higher education.

The questions in decolonizing higher education

Since the end of the 20th century, there is growing criticism in academia and in social movements of the Eurocentric nature of higher education. Among academia, this critique is echoed in postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, orientalism, decolonial studies, etc. In social movements, it has gained momentum in Latin America where Decolonial Universities have been set up in Bolivia and Ecuador. In Asia, the Multiversity Network have organized seven biennial conferences on how to decolonize the western based universities in the global South. In Europe and North America, decolonial networks and summer schools have operated for ten years. In South Africa, the Rhodes Must Fall movement carries the slogan of decolonizing the universities of South Africa.

So, what does decolonizing the university mean?

First, it starts with the acknowledgement that there has been a fundamental colonial bias in knowledge production since the European Enlightenment. The bias is in epistemology (how knowledge is conceptualized and produced), in foundational concepts within disciplines of the social sciences and the history of the natural sciences and in the methodology of research and analysis in both social and natural sciences. Decolonizing knowledge production begins by criticizing this bias.

Second, it looks at foundational concepts in knowledge production that have been produced in scientific traditions outside the West. What are these other concepts in economic theory, social analysis and even mathematics? How relevant are they in establishing new foundations of the different disciplines of science?



Third, it links theory with the practice of social change. If current policy is often based on Eurocentric sciences (economic policy, social policy, cultural policies, technology, etc.), what would new policies look like if we were to use other concepts in science?

Decolonizing higher education is about changing the content of the knowledge produced and disseminated in higher education. So, it is a more fundamental challenge than diversity policy.

The question of diversity in higher education

The primary questions about diversity in higher education revolve around two issues:

1. Access to higher education: ensure that people from targeted communities can get access to universities. Diversity policy is directing at removing the obstacles that prevent access and implementing policies to prevent early dropout from the educational system.
2. Representation of targeted communities: implementing policies to encourage people from targeted communities to access higher education.

A proper representation of communities that are suffering from the legacy of colonialism challenges the nature of Eurocentric knowledge production and dissemination. Racism in society will be reflected in racism in the educational system.

Thus, diversity can open the gate to decolonizing higher education.

The question of power and confrontation

Decolonizing the university is about confronting the authority of knowledge production and thus engaging in a struggle about power. If we criticize professors for producing biased knowledge, then obviously, we attack their authority. Such attacks are not without consequence. The formal policy of freedom of expression and the encouragement of free debate then makes way for a reaction aimed at preventing the critique. Seldom is there an answer to the critique in terms of content. Very often an instrument of repression is used.

In such a climate, diversity policy can develop into the alternative to decolonizing the university. In fact, that is what happened at the University of Amsterdam.¹

Early in 2015, white students and staff from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) occupied the administrative buildings as a protest against announced budget cuts. They demanded greater democracy: election of the university board, referendums and an open debate on budget cuts. In the wake of this movement, students of colour raised the slogan "*No democratization without*

¹ <http://www.din.today/divergent-research-methodologies-diversity-and-decolonization-at-the-university-of-amsterdam/>.



decolonization". Through lectures and debates, the issue of decolonization of the university was put on the agenda.

In response to this movement, the university board established a commission typically named *Commission for Diversity* rather than *Commission for Decolonization*. Recently they produced a report titled *Let's do diversity*. I have written a decolonial critique of the report that concludes that the report of the Commission is not rooted in a decolonial analysis, but in the methodological principles of Eurocentric positivism. This is not a step forward in decolonizing the university but a step backwards. The banner "no democratization without decolonization" is replaced by "no democratization without diversity". And "diversity" means everything but a consistent struggle against racism.

It then becomes a substitute for decolonizing higher education and loses its significance as a way to emancipate the communities of colour.

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