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SPECIAL SECTION ARTICLE | DECOLONISING THE UNIVERSITY

Decolonisation, knowledge production, and interests in liberal higher education

Abstract

This essay explores how calls for decolonisation in universities have engaged with ideas about liberalism and liberal education. It maps the historical context of liberal education as embodied in the development of modern European universities and colonial interests their respective nation-states. It offers comparative perspectives on how ideas of decolonisation in higher education have confronted liberal and nation-state interests at different historical conjunctures in three postcolonial settings: in the establishment of a national university in India during the 1960s; in protests by university students in post-apartheid South Africa between 2015 and 2017; and in growing commitments to Indigenous recognition and knowledges in Australian universities from the 2000s. The essay highlights the need for those active in contemporary decolonisation movements in universities in the global North and South to confront the paradoxical interests of liberal education and nationalisms in knowledge production, epistemic and socio-economic justice, and sociality in higher education.

Keywords

decolonisation; higher education; knowledge production; post-colonial and settler colonial states; universities;

Key insights

Despite enthusiasm about decolonisation in/of academic debates, few have sought to critically analyse its relationship to ideas of liberalism and liberal education in universities. This essay considers how ideas of decolonisation in higher education have confronted liberal and nation-state interests at different historical moments in India, South Africa, and Australia. It highlights the need to confront the paradoxical interests of liberal education and nationalisms in knowledge production, epistemic and socio-economic justice, and sociality in higher education.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Decolonisation, as a concept and term, has been around for more than a century in world regions that experienced European colonial and imperial rule. In the last decade, however, there has been a remarkable surge in the use of the term in universities in the global North. The surge may be partly attributed to declining interest in postcolonial studies—which mostly centred on critical analysis of European colonialism in the global South—and growing interest in addressing persistent racial and social injustices in European settler-colonial states and former imperial metropoles. As Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 2) have observed of the United States, decolonisation is increasingly used in academic discourse as a metaphor to supplant "previous ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives." There are calls to decolonise schools, curricula, student thinking, information technology, publishing, and much more. While past calls for decolonisation in the global South had an explicit political agenda to confront European colonial domination and associated ideologies, it is unclear how current use of the terms decolonise and decolonisation in academic discourse engages with prevailing political regimes and ideologies in higher education.

In this essay, I explore how calls for decolonisation in universities have engaged with ideas of liberalism and liberal education. I focus on this engagement for two reasons. First, most universities in the global North and South profess their commitment to ideas of liberal higher education embodied in nineteenth century origins of the modern university. Second, European colonisers and settler colonial nation-states, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, invoked liberal ideologies in varied ways to legitimise their rule over peoples in the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Today the term liberal has multiple and overlapping connotations. Liberal can refer to an attitude of openness and respect towards opinions or ideas different from one's own; a political philosophy based on values of individual rights and freedoms, civil liberty, social equality, and welfare; or a political-economic program that promotes individualism, self-reliance, free enterprise, and market-based approaches for governing society (Ong, 2006). These ideas have been mobilised in different ways and historical moments in public debates and policies to influence the working of universities in the global North and South.

Frantz Fanon (1963, p. 27) noted that decolonisation is a process that "cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content." I take this perspective to explore how calls for decolonisation in universities have emerged at different historical conjunctures and postcolonial contexts. First, I outline the economy of knowledge production in higher education and how it is constituted in relation to the interests of universities and nation-states. Second, I examine the idea of liberal education and its historical development in shaping

modern universities in European nation-states and their colonies. Third, I consider how ideas about decolonisation in higher education have been mobilised at different historical conjunctures in three postcolonial contexts: in the establishment of a national university in India during the 1960s; in varied protests by university students in post-apartheid South Africa between 2015 and 2017; and in growing commitments to Indigenous recognition and knowledges in Australian universities from the 2000s.

2 | THE ECONOMY OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

At first glance, knowledge production seems like any other kind of production, a social and material activity with its own geographies and scales. But closer consideration reveals other dimensions and variations.

At one level, knowledge production is ubiquitous, an integral part of living, being, relying on, and reshaping the social and material worlds we inhabit. Knowledge is constantly being produced and practiced in everyday life by observing; interacting and questioning changes; extending and making connections between different phenomena; and testing and refining in repeated performances. Whether knowledge involves harvesting wild foods, carpentry, or speculating on the stock market, its production is embodied as sets of skills and tacit sensibilities that enable people to work and live. As embodied, knowledge is constantly being augmented, adapted, and transformed when passed on between generations—for example, within families, by community elders, or by experienced artisans (Sennett, 2008).

At another level, knowledge production is a formalised activity that involves using concepts and techniques to produce different bodies of knowledge by classifying and ordering, from elementary to advanced levels, general to specialised foci. Such bodies of knowledge are produced and transmitted in and by institutions using formalised systems of instruction. These systems and institutions encompass the formal domain of higher education, where production involves specialised ways to seek novel inputs to augment, reconfigure, and transmit bodies of knowledge. Universities constitute such domains that are linked by varying levels of intensity and scales of operation and reach to global geographies of formalised knowledge production and circulation (Connell, 2016).

Unlike embodied knowledge, which is internally resourced and sustained through productive activity, universities require external resources to maintain themselves and their knowledge production. These resources may be derived from community contributions, lands granted by states or nobility, public and private funding, philanthropic donations, and fees charged to students. Knowledge production in universities is thus defined by particular historical and

political geographies of epistemological, political, economic, and cultural power (Mamdani, 2016).

A critical concern for universities is, therefore, to mobilise resources by articulating their value using different registers: as institutions that promote intellectual development and generate material benefit for their states; as centres of scholarly excellence that produce knowledge of the highest quality and standards; as providers of credentials that confer social advantage and universal privilege to their students; and as institutions that burnish the universal prestige and power of nation-states, donors, and publics that support them. In other words, universities justify their immanent societal value through aspirational interests of material relevance, superior standards, upward mobility, and increased prestige. Since their economy hinges on promises to deliver compounded value and power from knowledge production and transmission, it should not surprise anyone that universities have vested interests in the geopolitical or colonial ambitions and commercial ventures of their nation-states and wealthy patrons (Cook, 2007).

Yet, despite the obvious alignment of interests with prevailing political economic power, disinterestedness is a core concept underpinning knowledge production in universities. Disinterestedness is expressed in two ways: as academic freedom—that is, as intellectual inquiry freed from subservience to political interests; and as disinterest in the pecuniary gains generated by free intellectual production for universal benefit. Such ideas have been central to the Humboldtian model of liberal higher education that shaped the historical development of the modern university in the global North and South (Sorkin, 1983). According to the model, universities should be liberal, unencumbered spaces where scholars and students pursue higher truths in free debates, inquiries, investigations, and critical interrogations of established conventions and modes of thought. Disinterested scholarship in universities forms the basis for assessing their credibility and the quality and veracity of knowledge production (as pure, impartial, unbiased, independent, and universally beneficial).

How does this sketch of knowledge production in universities relate to the politics of decolonisation? To answer this question, it is useful to revisit ideas underpinning the emergence of the liberal university model in nineteenth century Germany.

3 | MODERN NATION-STATES, UNIVERSITIES, AND THE COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Between 1809 and 1810, Wilhelm von Humboldt headed the Prussian state's Section for Religion and Education, during which he proposed reforming the education system by linking

his new ideas of nation formation to the German neo-humanism concept of *Bildung*—roughly translated as individual self-development (Sorkin, 1983). Humboldt recognised the growing popular discontent in Europe with absolutist states and burgeoning desire for greater political freedoms following the French Revolution. He argued that the nation was a collective, cultural expression of positive association between free individuals whereas the state was a legal entity for rule. The state could not force this collective moral association by dictating who could be educated, what they should learn and believe, or what functional roles they could perform. Instead, the Prussian state could reform the educational system to promote free self-development of individuals, which would organically lead to social bonding and a shared sense of civic and cultural association as a nation (idem).

Humboldt's concept of *Bildung* embodied a new ideology for creating modern nation-states but contained critical tensions about ideas related to individual freedom and conceptions of liberalism. As Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 477) observed, the tiny hyphen that sits between nation and state "links two very different entities with distinct histories, constituencies and 'interests'." Humboldt's vision of liberal education promised to bring the nation and the state into harmonious alignment but required the state to be a benign benefactor in the individual and collective *Bildung* process. The state was to be financially responsible for education but could not intervene or influence its content and delivery. It needed to provide education to every individual within its jurisdiction regardless of social status or financial capacity. It needed to bestow land grants to universities so they could maintain financial and intellectual independence as *national* institutions of disinterested knowledge production (Bhattacharya, 2019a). Such commitment and investment in liberal education would organically lead to the development of a modern nation-state committed to freedom, progress, and prosperity for its populace.

The Humboldtian model was adapted by most European states during the nineteenth century to modernise their universities. There was, however, a paradox in the idea of disinterestedness. Universities relied on the benevolence of their states and mercantile patrons and were deeply enmeshed in their geopolitical-economic interests and wealth gained from commercial and colonial ventures. From the seventeenth century onwards, much of the scientific research in these universities depended on the collection, appropriation and reconfiguration of embodied knowledges and formalised knowledge systems of colonised peoples for territorial domination and commercial profits (see Bleichmar et al., 2009; Brockway, 1979; Grove, 1996; Raj, 2006).

Britain adapted the Humboldtian model during the nineteenth century to bolster and manage its colonial interests across the world. Old elite universities such as Cambridge and Oxford

and their affiliated colleges were oriented to provide education that would serve the state's imperial enterprise. There was an intellectual division of labour between universities and colleges. Universities functioned as privileged domains of philosophical and historical inquiry in established and emerging scientific disciplines, and as the peak institutions for setting examinations and conferring degrees to students graduating from affiliated colleges (Carruthers, 2016). Colleges were responsible for imparting the necessary values of Christian liberalism and possessive individualism that would spur Britain's universal civilisational mission and empire-building. Students who passed university examinations qualified for service in the imperial bureaucracy and colonial enterprise (Bhattacharya, 2019a).

Imperial Britain's higher education system thus established a colonial knowledge economy with a clear hierarchical geography of production and circulation. Embodied knowledges, knowledge systems, information, and intelligence obtained from the colonies were transmitted to elite universities in the metropole by various Royal Societies (Home, 2002), and bureaucratic networks. They were reconstituted in English as formalised scientific, legal, geographical, or ethnographic knowledge to educate prospective colonial administrators (see Edney, 1997; Goswami, 2004; Sangwan, 1991). From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, universities were established in several of Britain's key colonial territories and settler-colonies to provide necessary education to local elites for carrying out lower-order bureaucratic functions of the imperial government. Although these colonial universities followed the university and affiliated colleges structure established in Britain, they were mainly degree-granting and teaching institutions with little to no local capacity to conduct independent scientific research or promote research in new disciplines (Jayaram, 2007). Lecturers, curricula, standards, examinations, and evaluation measures all made their way down the knowledge production hierarchy from the imperial metropole.

Thus, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, knowledge production in universities reflected the global political economy of colonial-imperial ambitions of European nation-states and settler-colonial states. It was a dualistic model underwritten by teleological narratives of civilizational progress and articulated through a hierarchy of intellectual, geopolitical, cultural, and class privilege from the metropole to the colonies. Europe's universities were deeply invested in teaching the colonised to accept their subservience and know their rank and place in the economic, social, and intellectual hierarchy of global knowledge production.

The anti-colonial struggles that arose in Africa and Asia during the first half of the twentieth century challenged the deceitful invocations of *universal* liberalism by their European overlords. Their calls for decolonisation included self-government and new constitutions that

guaranteed equal rights and freedoms for their peoples. Some envisioned universal access to education with emphasis on overcoming the structural hierarchies of colonial education. They saw universities as sites of national political engagement, self-development, and mobilisation to overcome the economic degradation, inequalities, and social injustices perpetrated by colonial rule (Mamdani 2016).

4 | POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXTS AND LIBERAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Before I delve into specific examples of how ideas of decolonisation have been mobilised in universities in India, South Africa, and Australia, three justifications are warranted. The first is straightforward: familiarity; I have spent a significant part of my academic career working in these countries. The second is that all three were parts of the British Empire between the mid-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, albeit under different political relations with Britain. The third is that the proportional compositions of coloniser and colonised populations have shaped how knowledge production and modern higher education developed in these countries: in India, a British colonial minority ruling over a subcontinent encompassing diverse cultural polities; in South Africa, a British and Dutch-Afrikaner colonial-settler minority dominating diverse African cultural polities; and in Australia, an Anglo-Celtic colonial settler majority decimating and dominating diverse Aboriginal polities. Bringing them within a relational comparative frame of analysis (Hart, 2018) allows a novel geohistorical perspective on how calls for decolonisation of higher education have emerged in all of them.

India, South Africa, and Australia each has its unique set of postcolonial moments in relation to the broader historical conjunctures emerging from the early to mid-twentieth century. India achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1947 and was constituted as a sovereign democratic republic in 1950 (Banerjee-Dube 2015). The Union of South Africa was established in 1910 after the Anglo-Boer wars and formed a self-governing dominion of the British Empire ruled by an English and Afrikaner settler minority, later achieving fully sovereign status under the British monarchy in 1934. The Afrikaner-led National Party, which was elected in 1948, formally instituted *apartheid* as the basis for the country's governance and development. In 1961, South Africa became a republic and left the British Commonwealth but continued under white settler rule. Apartheid formally ended in 1990 and South Africa became a fully democratic republic in 1994 (Thompson 2000). In Australia, Anglo-Celtic settler colonisation began from 1788 and expanded across the continent as independent colonies were established and then federated in 1901 as a Commonwealth under the British monarchy. The federation's constitution did not recognise the Aboriginal peoples of the land nor their prior ownership of lands seized and occupied in the name of the British

Crown. It also instituted a 'White Australia' policy that restricted non-European immigration (and was prejudiced against southern and centralEuropeans). Aboriginal peoples in Australia were accorded recognition as citizens in 1967 and the White Australia policy formally abolished in 1966 and fully renounced in 1973. The Native Title Act of 1993 recognised Aboriginal traditional ownership of lands expropriated in the name of the British Crown (Peel and Twomey 2017).

The postcolonial moments of these countries articulated with broader global economic processes and political conjunctures. The phase of economic reconstruction and industrialisation between the end of World War Two in 1945 and the 1960s was also a period when many colonised peoples in Africa and Asia fought for and gained political independence. Numerous geopolitical and fiscal crises between the mid-1970s and 1990s resulted in structural adjustment and austerity programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and widespread adoption of neoliberal economic policies by governments across the global North and South. With the founding of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and introduction of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1995, globalisation became a driving narrative justifying corporation-dominated liberalism over state-led liberal agendas of national development. Global capital flows, financialisation, privatisation of public services, and erosion of state commitment to social welfare and equity intensified over subsequent decades and have continued into the present.

Universities in India, South Africa and Australia have evolved within these global and postcolonial articulations. Decolonisation has different symbolic meanings in each of these contexts. In what follows, I consider how the engagement between decolonisation and liberalism has taken form as constituting dissent, reframing justice, and unsettling truths.

5 | CONSTITUTING DISSENT

Since being voted to power consecutively in 2014 and 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Narendra Modi has set its sights on one public university in the nation's capital—the Jawaharlal Nehru University, better known as JNU—to convey its political mission for Indian higher education: the imposition of Hindu fundamentalist ideologies and 'national culture' in university curricula and proclamations of dissent against the government's actions as 'seditious' or 'anti-national.' JNU has been routinely labelled a breeding ground for 'anti-nationals' who threaten 'Indian' (Hindu majoritarian) culture and national security. Public debates, seminars, and protests organised by student groups at the university have been shut down on claims of inciting violence against the state (Prasad, 2020).

JNU is not the only 'central' university directly funded by the Government of India to be targeted by Modi's regime. Students and academics from many such leading central universities have been charged with sedition and imprisoned without bail or trial; many have 'disappeared' from university campuses with no follow-up investigations by police (Azad et al., 2017). JNU, however, has been the lightning rod for populist criticism by the government and its echo media who accuse its students of wasting taxpayer money for being 'political' instead of focusing on their 'studies' (Kumar, 2016). The criticism is ironic because India's public universities have always been political spaces. These were sites where students challenged colonial rule and laws of racial classification, caste-based hierarchies, and inequalities, and where they have continued to do so with postcolonial governments (Mani, 2004; Nair, 2019).

Despite being branded as the hotbed of anti-nationalism, JNU is nationally and internationally acknowledged as one of India's leading research universities and a centre of public intellectual activity. Many of the country's internationally renowned scholars, political leaders, bureaucrats, and social activists are its graduates. The university routinely appears at the top of national academic ranking frameworks (Loomba, 2019). Why, then, has such a successful public university become the whipping post for Modi's regime? The answer, I suggest, lies in the decolonising principles on which it was founded.

The proposal to establish a new national university in Delhi was put forward in late 1964, roughly six months after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first Prime Minister. The member introducing the bill in parliament proposed that the university should embody the non-colonial internationalism and liberal socialist ideals that Nehru espoused and worked for in his lifetime. After two years of vigorous parliamentary debate in the upper and lower houses, the bill was passed and became the JNU Act, 1966. It legislated the founding of a national university that combined Nehru's ideas with the directive principles of the Indian Constitution. It was to promote the study of science and technology to address the problems of Indian society, social justice, secularism, democratic ways of life, national integration, and new international relations between postcolonial countries (Batabyal, 2014).

The parliamentary debates were critical in shaping the decolonial vision of the university. It was agreed that it should not duplicate the old universities set up under colonial rule, and ought to reflect India's innate diversity and cosmopolitan character. When some members of parliament called for a national university that would compete against the best in the world, others countered by highlighting the need for a university that would lead the way in tackling the realities and problems facing the country. One member asserted, "let us not have

Cambridges and Oxfords and Princetons and Harvards here," but rather "let us create universities and colleges that our people need, that our development needs, for the remaking of our material and cultural being." He urged that the debate shift "from the upper classes to the classes that are economically at the bottom layers of the society," and focus on providing access to children of peasants, workers, and other socially-disadvantaged groups. He noted that such an investment to impart "higher scientific and technical education to the poorer sections of the community will have been repaid in course of time in creative and even constructive labour which would go to the benefit of the entire society" (all quotes from Batabyal, 2014, p. 8).

JNU admitted its first cohort of students in 1969. In subsequent years and decades, it became the prominent face of decolonising praxis in higher education in India. It selected students through examinations and interviews at numerous centres across every state and union territory of the country. In addition to selecting candidates from untouchable and low castes, tribes, and minority communities identified in the Indian Constitution, the university developed a comprehensive admissions policy that combined the candidates' scholastic performance with 'social deprivation' weightage points based on gender, economic status, physical disability, state and region of origin (JNU, 2020). The residential campus in Delhi became a cosmopolitan crucible of national and international cultural, regional, and socio-economic diversity. Students freely debated ideas, shared their lived realities, and produced research that critically engaged with issues of socio-political transformation. Being located in the nation's capital, JNU also became a vocal site for student dissent and mobilisation against the policies and actions of the government of the day (Batabyal, 2014).

JNU has thus become one of the most visible spaces symbolising India's decolonisation experiment over the past five decades. Along with many more centrally-funded universities around the country, it functions as a unique space where students from Dalit (untouchable and low castes), tribal, and Adivasi (Indigenous) communities and lower socio-economic backgrounds from different states freely interact with peers from more privileged and affluent circumstances (Chaudhuri, 2017; Deshpande, 2016). New tensions have been generated by the "politics of presence" ensuing from this diverse mix (Nair, 2019, p. 46). Many students draw on those diverse histories and lived experiences to critically examine the socio-economic and political marginalisation processes implicit in mainstream policies and nationalist narratives (Hany Babu, 2019), and many challenge formalised knowledges and theories that entrench majoritarian privilege (Teltumbde, 2019).

Such radical social transformation is antithetical to the majoritarian religious agenda of Modi's regime. Its *Hindutva* ideology is about proclaiming Hindu nationalist supremacy

based on a pastiche of nineteenth century British colonial theories of race, German romanticist interpretations of ancient Indian history, and early twentieth century European fascist ideologies (Thapar, 1981). Its mission is to reassert India's global civilisational superiority by upholding 'traditional' Hindu culture and associated majoritarian social hierarchies. Hence the decolonisation experiment embodied by JNU and its politically-active student community has become an 'anti-national' problem for the Modi regime.

6 | REFRAMING JUSTICE

Between 2015 and 2017, universities across South Africa experienced the effects of two student movements that erupted on the campuses of two historically white universities: #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) at University of Cape Town (UCT) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The movements marked new approaches to student mobilisation around the persistent structural and everyday challenges faced by black students at universities despite the end of apartheid (Von Holdt and Naidoo, 2019).

The #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement arose at UCT from a protest performance against the generalised epistemic violence and alienation experienced by black students. Coinciding with the start of an annual public art event in March 2015 in Cape Town, Chumani Maxwele, a black student at UCT, poured a bucket of human faeces collected from the township of Khayelitsha over the statue of Cecil Rhodes—the nineteenth century British profiteer and arch embodiment of European settler colonialism—situated on the campus. Maxwele wanted his performance of desecration to highlight the structures of epistemic violence, alienation and disempowerment that operated against black students at UCT (Ahmed, 2019).

The protest performance rapidly gathered momentum. Students demanded the removal of Rhodes' statue from the campus and called for the university to decolonise by tackling institutional racism, reforming the Eurocentric curriculum, and ending labour outsourcing of campus services and maintenance. Within a month, the #RMF movement had succeeded in forcing the university administration to remove Rhodes' statue from the campus and agreeing to address issues of curriculum reform and service outsourcing (Ahmed, 2019).

#FeesMustFall (#FMF) emerged some six months later at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg against student fee increases and reduced government funding for public universities. The protests began on 6 October 2015 with a call to end outsourcing there and across all universities (#OutsourcingMustFall) and continued into the following week with students and workers rallying together against the proposed tuition fee increases for 2016. The #FMF student participants spoke of the extraordinary financial burdens of annual

fee increases and related social pressures on their ability to attend university. They reiterated calls for decolonisation that the #RMF protestors had raised and demanded that the Wits administration reduce fees and address institutionalised racism by democratising organisational structures and decision-making, reforming curricula that reinforced white superiority and privilege, and ending outsourcing of service workers (Langa, 2017).

The #FMF protests resonated widely with university students across race, political affiliation, and ideological perspective (Ndlovu, 2017). A week after the first #FMF rally at Wits, students from various universities in Cape Town marched to the national parliament to protest the budget presentation by the Minister for Education. The next day, students from universities in Johannesburg protested at the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters. The following day, on 23 October, the #FMF protestors gathered in Pretoria outside the national government offices and succeeded in getting then President Jacob Zuma to accede to their demands against fee increases (Habib, 2019).

#RMF and #FMF are the most recent and visible student movements that have emerged in South Africa since the ANC, a black majority party, was elected to power in 1994. The difficulties experienced by many black students seeking tertiary education has been a festering issue for universities (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). From the mid-2000s to 2015, the contribution of tuition fees to the total income of South African universities rose from 27% to 34% (Raghuram et al., 2020). During that period, students at many of the historically black universities regularly protested against financial exclusion and highlighted the starkly poor material and social conditions at their universities compared to historically white universities (Vilakazi, 2017). Although black students now comprise the majority at formerly white and privileged universities such as Wits and UCT, a significant proportion are from families that rely on low-paid, casualised service jobs similar to the outsourced workers in campus services and maintenance. Hence these privileged universities have also experienced numerous student protests against repeated fee increases and being forced to drop out due to financial and social stress (Booysen, 2016).

Problems of institutionalised racism in resourcing, curriculum, governance, and labour have been long-standing and contentious issues in South African universities that have persisted in the post-apartheid era. The roots of these problems go back to Bantu education policies for Native Africans devised by successive colonial, postcolonial, and apartheid governments from the early 1900s until the end of apartheid. Bantu education sought to reinforce the European colonial settler and apartheid ideology of racial hierarchy and segregated improvement with the need for non-competitive, cheap labour for national economic development (Christie & Collins, 1982). Its emphasis was on clearly differentiating the scope

of education for white and black populations so that the latter did not receive an education which would make them aspire for the status of the European community. The teaching of South African history in white universities was parochially centred on a triumphalist narrative of European settler colonialism (Mamdani, 1998). When black universities and technical colleges were established under the rubric of Bantu education, government funding for these institutions remained at around one-tenth of what was allocated for historically white universities. The scope of the curriculum at these institutions was limited to what was deemed appropriate for the role of black labourers and service workers in the apartheid economy and society (Christie & Collins, 1982; Wolpe, 1995).

When the African National Congress (ANC) led by Nelson Mandela came to govern after the first post-apartheid elections in 1994, it promised to play an active role in overcoming the racially-based discrimination and social inequalities in land ownership, access to education, and economic opportunities. Within a few years, however, President Mandela's reform-oriented program for reconstruction and development turned towards neoliberal policies that promoted market-driven rather than state-based delivery of public goods and services (Seehole & Adeyemo, 2016). On one hand, the government's White Paper on higher education transformation referred to social justice, equity and expanded access for populations disadvantaged by apartheid-era Bantu Education. On the other hand, the White Paper appeared to reinforce the apartheid rationality for educating the black population by granting primacy to skills training for national development and global economic competitiveness (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Neoliberal policies became normalised in subsequent decades by successive ANC governments, and the steady decline of funding for universities led to further entrenchment of disparities between historically white and black universities.

Despite reduced government support under neoliberal policies, historically white universities succeeded in maintaining their privileged status by increasing tuition fees and research income from the government's competitive grants schemes and financial incentives for academics for publishing in highly-ranked international journals. In contrast, because of poor investment in infrastructure and complex teaching and administrative loads, historically black universities were unable to raise student fees or academic research and publication income. The latter continued to operate on limited fee revenues from students who overwhelmingly depend on the government's financial aid/loan scheme (Webb, 2018). Reduced funding and persistent pressures from government to show competitiveness in global ranking metrics have, together, further undermined efforts to address social justice, equity, and curriculum reforms at both historically white and black universities (Mbembe, 2016).

In calling for decolonisation, #FMF and #RMF activists envisioned university education as pushing beyond the conventional liberal narratives of equal rights and free choice, and to radically reframe ideas of justice by bringing intersectionality together with Black radical feminism, Black consciousness, and Pan-Africanism (Ahmed, 2019). They considered this radical justice framework as a necessary basis to overcome the inherent racial and class distinctions within and between public universities in South Africa. From their perspective, decolonisation meant instituting epistemic and socio-economic justice in knowledge production: that is, recognising higher education as a public commitment rather than a private good; reworking university curricula to engage with more-than-White embodied and formal knowledges of South Africa's diverse communities; and properly valuing the critical role of service workers at universities through better employment conditions.

7 | UNSETTLING TRUTHS

In June 2020, amidst the crisis generated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, Dan Tehan, then the Australian Government's Minister of Education, Skills and Employment, announced reforms to higher education labelled as the Jobs-Ready Graduate package. Signalling revisions to university funding, the federal government proposed increases in student fee contributions for courses it regarded as less important than others for the country's economic future. The reforms heralded a new destiny for higher education with the repeated use of policy catchphrases such as: targeted investments, areas of national priority, job creation, industry linkages, global competitiveness, excellence and so on (DESE, 2020).

Not surprisingly, the proposed reforms provoked vociferous criticism from all quarters of higher education. There were dire predictions of decline in Australia's research competitiveness, the devaluation of humanities and social sciences, and the awful financial consequences for students struggling to complete their university education (Banks, 2020). Yet, despite voicing these valid concerns, all such criticisms of the reforms skirted around one unsettling truth that underpins the interests of federal and state governments and the managerial elite in higher education: the crucial role of international students as the resource extraction frontier fuelling Australia's so-called knowledge economy.

Australia's universities, excepting two, are considered public institutions that receive funding from federal and state governments. In reality, however, these universities operate as corporate businesses that substantially rely on revenues generated from 'internationalisation' of higher education. Internationalisation is a euphemism for an export strategy to generate revenue by recruiting foreign nationals to pursue their higher education in Australia or at specially established private offshore campuses of Australian universities. Until the mid-

1980s, more than 80% of funding for universities came from the national government. Students were primarily domestic from middle-class and elite backgrounds and paid no tuition fees to attend university. The presence of students from Indigenous communities was next to nil, and the proportion of foreign students was small and limited by quota (Marginson 2007).

Australia's earliest foray in international education began in 1950 with the initiation of the Colombo Plan. This was a postcolonial program influenced by the Cold Warforeign policy (also espoused by the British and Canadian governments) that aimed to curb the spread of communism in neighbouring countries newly liberated from European colonial rule. Packaged in liberal sentiments, the Colombo Plan offered scholarships to government-nominated students from South, Southeast Asian, and Pacific countries to obtain higher degrees from Australian universities and technical institutes. This limited quota allowed for a small non-white international presence at universities while the White Australia policy remained in place (Marginson, 2007). During the mid- to late-1980s, as successive governments adopted neoliberal economic policies, funding for the operational costs of public universities was reduced. Free tuition for domestic students was replaced by a government-backed loan system that allowed universities to generate revenue from increased student enrolments (Connell, 2015). From the mid-1990s, following the GATS categorisation of higher education as a globally tradeable service, Australian universities zealously embarked on their internationalisation mission with active support from the national government.

An apt illustration of how Australian universities metamorphosed into the internationalised business corporations of today is IDP Education Australia. It was set up in 1969 as the Australian Asian Universities Cooperation Scheme by the Australian Government soon after the formal ending of the White Australia policy. The scheme was devised as an international development aid program similar to the Colombo Plan to assist Southeast Asian universities improve their teaching and research capabilities by enabling their academic staff to study in Australian universities. Its name was changed to the International Development Program (IDP) in 1981 and, by the mid-1980s, it was remade into a private business for international student recruitment, with offices in Jakarta, Manila, Singapore, and Bangkok offering education counselling, exhibitions, and publicity for Australian universities. In 1989, IDP launched the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in collaboration with the British Council and University of Cambridge (DEST, 2007; IDP, 2020). In 1996, the company was wholly owned by all 38 Australian public universities, and by 2000 had set up offices in Malaysia, Vietnam, China, India, and Mauritius. In the last two decades, IDP has grown into a global conglomerate of higher education-related businesses extending from

international student recruitment, language testing, course advice, placement, and student services assistance both for Australian universities and also for universities in the English-speaking United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. The company was listed on the Australian Stock Exchange in 2015. Australian universities continue to hold the majority of its shares alongside the other major private stakeholder, SEEK Ltd, which provides online job-seeking and employment services (IDP, 2020; SEEK, 2020).

From the late 1980s to the present, Australian Government funding dropped from over 80% to less than 40% for operating costs at public universities (Horne, 2020). Despite the significant decline, universities have generated substantial revenues from international student fees which, unlike domestic student fees, their councils or boards of governors have been free to set (APH, 2019). Such revenue growth has been complemented by significant multiplier incomes from universities' investments in urban real estate, student housing developments, and related services. According to federal government statistics, the 2018–2019 export income from "education-related travel services" (meaning all international student revenue, including tuition and living costs in Australia) was only preceded by large-scale mining exports of iron ore, coal, and natural gas (DFAT, 2020). University administrators have repeatedly invoked these data to highlight their sector's contributions to the national economy. They have used more than 50% of their discretionary revenues from international student fees to invest in indicators and proxy categories used by global ranking systems to measure academic 'excellence' such as research grants and outputs, wealth, reputation, international student and staff numbers (see Larkins & Marshman, 2020). This expenditure is deemed critical for branding and marketing themselves as global elite destinations for higher education (Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

The decolonising knowledge discourse in Australian universities has emerged within this neocolonial political economy of higher education internationalisation. In many decades of struggle for recognition waged before and after the passage of the Native Title Act of 1993, Aboriginal elders, communities, activists, scholars, and their non-Aboriginal collaborators have worked hard to "unsettle the taken for granted" liberal fictions (Howitt, 2020) by which the Australian state has exercised power over their lands, connections to Country, and embodied knowledges (Langton, 2011; Nakata, 2007). They have argued for decolonisation in terms of recognition of sovereignty, agreement-making between governments and First Nations, and truth-telling about Australia's history (Uluru Statement, 2017). Yet, although the Australian Government's official discourse now appears to ritually acknowledge First Nations lands and Indigenous knowledges, there is little change in its mainstream liberal narrative of 'inclusion' regarding Indigenous education issues (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

While current debates on decolonising knowledge in Australian universities rightly call for transformation of curricula to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and histories, they are largely silent about the similarities of epistemic violence perpetrated by past settler-colonial liberal education and present neocolonial profiteering versions of neoliberal higher education. The global rankings that Australian universities invoke today to assert their elite knowledge production status embody a rationale not very different from nineteenth and twentieth century liberal assertions of European racial and civilisational superiority of knowledge production. On the pretext of pursuing prosperity, both past and present versions have profited from policies that rendered Indigenous and non-white migrants as expendable and exploitable resource frontiers (Khatun, 2018). Although some leading scholars have criticised the entrenchment of neoliberal corporatisation and growing precarity of knowledge workers (Connell, 2015), little is said about the parallels, overlaps, and continuities between old and new colonial forms of epistemic violence in Australian universities today.

8 | CONCLUSION

Scholars of decolonisation in higher education have mostly critiqued modernity (Andreotti et al., 2015) but not invested much effort in analysing the confluence of interests underpinning liberal education in different colonial geohistorical contexts (Bhattacharya, 2019b). They have tended to view the neoliberal shift in universities as a harsh break from the more benevolent past when Humboldtian values of liberal education prevailed (Jacob, 2009). But as I have shown here, this rupture is not so. There are robust continuities between the liberal education that was tied to the interests of European imperial/colonial/settler nation-states and the neoliberal knowledge economy that is driven by the geopolitical and commercial interests of present-day governments and corporatist university administrations.

Fanon (1963) made three important observations regarding decolonisation. First, it is disruptive because it challenges the ideological fictions of both European colonialism and postcolonial nationalisms and confronts the violence and oppression perpetrated by their established social hierarchies. Second, it refuses the venal calculus of colonial/postcolonial economic growth rationality, "what matters is to stop talking about output, and intensification, and the rhythm of work" (p. 253). Third, it goes beyond the conceits and deceits of European humanist philosophy to radically reconsider the question of a universal humanness, "of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized" (p. 253). For Fanon, decolonisation represented historical praxis embodied by struggles against the liberalisms that have underwritten European colonialism, settler-

colonisation, and imperialism, and a radical political project for forging alternative socialities based on respectful, non-exploitative interactions.

The experiences from universities in India, South Africa, and Australia illustrate Fanon's observations in different ways. In India, the post-independence decolonisation praxis in higher education represented by universities such as JNU sought to realise commitments to democracy, social justice, equality, non-majoritarianism, well-being, and dignity embodied by its constitution and internationalist visions of its early leaders. The proof of its relative success is evidenced by the repressive actions of the Hindu nationalist regime against allegedly anti-national politics of dissent and diversity of critical knowledge production in these universities. In South Africa, decolonisation movements such as #RMF and #FMF have challenged both the persistence of colonial liberal ideologies in their universities and post-apartheid governments' neoliberal policies. They have pressured governments to recognise higher education as a public commitment rather than an individual private investment and have compelled their universities to pursue epistemic and socioeconomic justice in knowledge production. In Australia, the decolonisation discourse has made important advances in revealing the epistemic violence perpetrated by settler-colonial state on Aboriginal recognition and knowledges but is yet to challenge the neocolonial export strategies pursued by government and corporatised university administrations.

Public universities in the global North and South today bear little resemblance to Wilhelm von Humboldt's nineteenth century vision for the modern university and liberal education—not that they ever did. But as decolonisation movements in universities confront liberal conservatism, neoliberalism, and majoritarian nationalisms, they need to test their governments and corporate university administrators on their professed commitment to upholding the values of Humboldtian liberal higher education. They need to push them to justify how their commitment to social equity, knowledge production for public benefit, and academic freedom squares with their interests in profiteering from privatisation, fee increases, internationalisation, and assertions of property rights over the intellectual work of their researchers.

Decolonisation and higher education are at a critical historical conjuncture. The COVID-19 pandemic has played a radical role in disrupting the neoliberal discourse and policies that dominated the world over the past four decades. This conjuncture presents an extraordinary opportunity for decolonisation activists in countries of the global South and North to create new moorings for epistemic and socio-economic justice and sociality in higher education.

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