

## Decolonising the Curriculum

To begin with, I am not going to talk about decolonizing the curriculum. I am going to talk about decolonizing curricula, plural, because there are, after all, many. Also, I will add, not all of them are decolonizable in the same way, so I am going to talk about an approach rather than about a programme.

According to David Hamilton in 'Towards a Theory of Schooling', the first person to use curriculum to describe a programme of study was Petrus Ramus in 1576. Ramus was influential enough to have a short-lived branch of Philosophy, Ramism named after him. Interestingly for the local context, Hamilton points out that this very short lived branch of philosophy did, however, survive in Calvinist Theology well into the eighteenth century.

On the point of the intersection between Ramism and Calvinism, Hamilton draws an interesting connection. He argues that Ramus' use of the term spread through Europe along Calvinist circuits due to its compatibility with Calvin's idea of discipline. Because, for the followers of Calvin, well ordered institutions, like schools and churches were essential to the maintenance of Calvin's ideas and their influence.

Interestingly, here we have the first meeting of the two terms that, to this day, guide our organization of intellectual work and pedagogy at universities – discipline and curriculum.

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Discipline and curriculum are therefore, from their earliest appearance used to organize institutions in service of extending and entrenching influence. And we can perhaps meditate on how contemporary secular universities continue to be steeped in the organizational principles of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant agenda.

In my limited understanding of Calvinism, discipline is central because it guards the church against the corrupting influence of wickedness in a world where the church exists alongside the wicked. The curriculum as a Ramist idea fits this very well because it is there to guard against the contamination of students by the wrong sorts knowledge. This historical point resonates well with Harry Garuba's argument that the curriculum is a mode of cultural reproduction – it not only maintains a discipline, it preserves the character of that discipline by granting and withdrawing value from the objects in the discipline's domain of study.

I would add that this granting and withdrawing is visible through four mechanisms. Omission (as in "we will not teach African Philosophy"), institutional containment (as in "we will teach African philosophy in a

separate course or in a department of African studies", leaving the thrust of the discipline untouched), intellectual containment (as in "we will teach African Philosophy by evaluating it from the perspective of our chosen European philosophical tradition" so that African philosophy becomes the curriculum's straw man), and finally; camouflage (we will teach those African philosophers and appoint black staff who are deemed good in terms of the discourse structuring an otherwise unchanged curriculum). There are likely other tricks too.

Here I want to point out that adding African philosophy into a department (attempting to overcome exclusion by omission) can easily amount to exclusion by containment in special courses or electives. Appointing a black philosopher to teach African Philosophy can easily do the same so that the curriculum continues to reproduce Africa from the perspective of the colonizer as Mamdani accused UCT of doing in his published debate with Martin Hall from whom he inherited an African Studies curriculum of this sort.

If one task of the curriculum is to discipline knowledge, to keep domains ordered and free from corruption, then decolonizing a curriculum requires replacing the principles of order and value that the curriculum serves, not simply shuffling content.

So, here is the understanding of curriculum I want to proceed with.

A curriculum is what determines the epistemic boundaries and reproductive horizons of a discipline. As a consequence a curriculum produces zones of exclusion into which are dumped all that is covered by a discipline's domain but from which it withdraws value. This curricular inevitability coincides well with what I consider to be a central feature of colonialism and of its newest neoliberal face.

Elsewhere I have argued that a central feature of colonialism is what I termed the territorial ontology. A binary world of extractable value and waste. Colonialist powers acquired an area through conquest and rapidly set about determining what sorts of value could be extracted, how to extract it and how to govern that extraction, including how to dispose of what was not valued, how to legitimise conquest, and how to reiterate of conquest. Colonialism was conquest and quantification, and to be sure, you cannot have quantification without conquest, or at least, without the violence of abstraction and alienation.

Within that context, be it ideologically or technically, science and the humanities in large measure grew to serve these violences of abstraction necessary to the extraction of value, to the legitimization of colonial rule, to the reiteration of conquest. Geology was concerned with soils and minerals, not for their beauty or their being, but for their prospects. Anthropology was concerned with people, but the discipline was often spent in service of rendering colonial populations governable such that they could be converted into labour. Witness Volkekunde at Afrikaans universities, which saw most of its graduates taken up in employment in the military or bantu administration where curriculated powers of abstraction were deployed in service of legitimizing separate de-

velopment. Environmental science was likewise brought to bear on the management of the natural world in service of extractive economies first on Indian Ocean islands like Saint Helena and later in continental contexts like India and Southern Africa. In service of legitimation, Theologians like Totius argued for the biblical foundations of Apartheid.

Accompanied by each value defining abstraction, therefore was the concomitant production of waste, of that without value, and this inevitability of curriculum as a selection of what is worth knowing came to resemble the colonial judgement of what was worth keeping. Curricula may, then, be colonial inasmuch as elements of this valuation continue to exercise their effect in and through our classrooms. And this extends beyond the representational and identity politics that has trapped the discussion to date in the humanities.

We can discern the colonial character of a discipline much like archaeologists can discern the material culture of an extinct society – by going through its garbage. By examining the zones of exclusion that it has played a part in producing. And it is to these zones that we must look to compose an alternative system of valuing knowledge. I want to suggest that there are two categories of exclusion that we might look to in order to begin that composition work. The first is to be found on our campuses, the second, more important one is Mbembe's death worlds.

As with transgressions of Calvin's church discipline, transgressing the curriculum may result in excommunication. It is possible, for example to not be a 'real' archaeologist because you are less interested in excavating artifacts than you are in excavating the racial history of archaeology as a discipline. It is

possible to not be 'real' architect because you are less interested in designing buildings than what you are in how designed spaces reproduce forms of inequality.

If you look closely and listen well on most university campuses you can find intellectual spaces populated by the excommunicated. More often than not these spaces are concentrations of interest in topics that challenge the discourses of curricula – on topics within disciplines' domain but historically excluded from them – African Studies; Gender Studies; Popular Culture; Queer Studies; Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

I want to put it to you, perhaps unkindly that these intellectual concentration camps in part serve a containment function to keep disciplines from having to grapple with their own uncomfortable histories and blind spots, and we should look here for reflexive resources needed to compose new curricula.

With these resources it is possible to look into the spaces Mbembe has described as death worlds and ask two questions. How have and do curricula participate in the unfolding of these worlds? And how do the people damned to live in these worlds manage to endure in and aspire from those spaces. Where the practices that are the foundation of their endurance and their aspiration fall within and across disciplinary lines, our curricula might by vastly improved and certainly decolonized by working to serve those aspirations and practices. So, to start, ask the following two simple questions: How does my curriculum, locally and in global terms, make waste of humans and non humans and what does my curriculum do to serve their refusal to be waste.