Decolonizing the Academy:
The Limits of Race-centric Approaches

Introduction

In the last 5 years, the global south has been characterized by intense debates on how universities can best produce knowledge that serves local populations instead of former colonial masters. In South Africa, calls for a more locally relevant university have, by and large, manifested in a "decolonial movement" that strongly takes race as the central axis of decolonial strategies. To be sure, the increasing popularity of race-centric decolonial strategies as a means to empower historically marginalized groups extends beyond the global south. In the US - and indeed the West in general - similar strategies have been advanced by scholars such as Martin (1976), Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) and others. Given this level of preeminence, race-centric decolonial strategies have effectively become the preferred mode of organizing for subaltern groups across many university campuses. Yet, given the complexity of the composition of local populations in the global south (both in terms of identities, and the power dynamics within and between such identities) as well as the intricate character of knowledge production (see Said, 1994; Chibber, 2014; Smith & Tivaringe, 2016); the idea that race-centric decolonial strategies are, by definition, emancipatory

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to the subaltern becomes, at best, simplistic and inadequate, and at worst, ill-informed and therefore a misdiagnosis of the real challenges that characterize knowledge production. In this paper, I explore whether race-centric decolonial strategies can effectively lead to the decolonization of the academy. I argue that, efforts to decolonize the academy through a shift in the racial configuration of academics run into the inevitable pitfall of statically equating particular ideas with particular identities in ways that are inadvertently antithetical to reclamation of subjugated epistemologies. For this reason, the exclusive focus on race as a decolonial strategy may as well be the contemporary impediment to the reclamation of epistemologies rather than the solution. The argument raised here is primarily theoretical. As such, the first sections of the paper will discuss a) the philosophical underpinnings of race-centric decolonial solutions, and b) the theoretical challenges (both explicit and implicit) that render race-centric decolonial solutions theoretically untenable. Beyond the theoretical limitations, the later sections of

the paper will also examine a race-based decolonial strategy in South Africa to further show the empirical conundrums that emerge from implementation of such a decolonial initiative.

Race-centric decolonial strategies: The Gramscian Roots

Race-centric decolonial strategies aimed at decolonizing the academy have been advanced along one fundamental line of reasoning: since the colonial process was characterized by the subjugation of epistemologies associated with the colonized groups (often non-whites), it follows that the reclamation of the said epistemologies in the post-colonial era can be fundamentally achieved by ensuring that more people from historically marginalized groups participate in the knowledge production process (Mangcu, 2016). For this paradigm, increased participation of historically marginalized groups in the academy necessarily translates to the reclamation of subjugated epistemologies. For instance, in his model for "decolonizing South African Sociology", prominent academic, Xolela Mangcu, argued that "South African sociology must place Black perspectives on race at the center of its curriculum" (2016, p.5). Building on Henry

Louis Gates Jr.'s idea of a "shared text of Blackness", Mangcu posits that Black perspectives can be drawn from "Black writers" (p.6). For him, the central inclusion of Black writers in South African sociology "would provide a practical example of the decolonization of the curriculum demanded by students throughout the university system" (p.7).

Mangcu is not alone in making this call. In their seminal, *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*, Ladson-Billings and Tate IV's (1995) analysis of the challenges between learning, political economy and policy leads them to a conclusion akin to Marcus Garvey's "race first philosophy" (p.61). Having observed that, because of its reliance on "white standards," the turn to multiculturalism in the US education system was essentially incompatible with the "authentic black personality," Ladson-Billings and Tate IV reasoned that "any program of emancipation would have to be built around the question of race first" (1995, p.61).

Theoretically conspicuous in the reasoning provided by Mangcu (2016), Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) and other such race-centric decolonialists (see also Zavala, 2013; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Blassingame, 1971) are two fundamental commitments: a) that there is an authentic and homogenous shared thought among a particular racial group - what Mangcu calls "black perspectives from black writers" (2016, p.6); and b) that just as there are racial differences, such monolithic perspectives also vary along racial lines. In other words, there is a static mode of reasoning that is intrinsically linked to a particular racial group).

By character – at least in the power asymmetry between social groups – these theoretical commitments are synonymous with Gramsci's seminal work, *Cultural Hegemony*. In this work, Gramsci advances the concept of the "subaltern" as a category of populations that are outside of the hegemonic power structure (1995, p.32). For Gramsci and subsequent theorists who share these commitments (see for example Hall, 2007; Spivak, 2007), intellectuals from hegemonic groups advance their epistemologies through marginalizing epistemologies from non-dominant groups. To be fair, unlike Mangcu (2016) and the other race-centric theorists, Gramsci (1995) delineates between population groups on the basis of culture instead of race.

The invocation of Gramsci here is aimed at a) acknowledging the intellectual lineage of the decolonial paradigm, b) to reaffirm that indeed the need to address asymmetrical power dynamics in knowledge production remains an important contemporary challenge, and c) importantly, to show that, because of the inherent race reductionism in race-centric decolonial theory, such a model of advancing decolonization necessarily fragments the subaltern. Since the subaltern groups that the race-centric decolonial theorists seek to emancipate are composed of people whose subjugation occurs along numerous lines that include but is not limited to race it therefore seems regressive that a project that once started with culture as a central organizing axis has now shifted to race. For, given the heterogeneity of racial groups that continue to be negatively impacted by colonial processes, limiting decolonial approaches to race-based strategies shows that a once promising attempt to address social asymmetries is becoming a mode of fracturing subjugated groups through colonial hierarchies.

Race-centric Decolonial Approaches: The Pitfalls

That the subjugation of ways of knowing that were incongruent with colonial ideas was both a corollary and a product of the colonial process is a well-documented historical fact that virtually elicits no contention. Furthermore, that such historically "subjugated epistemologies" (Foucault, 2012) ought to be reclaimed is as ethically sound as it is intellectually prudent. On that score, decolonial theory is raising key normative and intellectual issues that warrant serious consideration. However, if the task raised by decolonial theory is of reclaiming subjugated epistemologies, then the solutions advanced by the race-centric variant of this school of thought are, at the very least wanting and at most, antithetical to achieving such ends. For starters, because race-centric decolonial theorists are fundamentally committed to a conception of knowledge that posits a static link between identity and knowledge, this theoretical paradigm inevitably runs into the challenge of equating modes of thoughts with racial identities. In other words, it becomes perfectly justifiable for racial groups to effectively claim ownership – and indeed monopoly – over modes of thought. For instance, in his account of how

research strategies can be decolonized, Miguel Zavala argues for an invocation of what he terms "a Raza standpoint that privileges the vantage point of colonized peoples from Latin America" (2013, p.56) to enable the reclamation of subjugated epistemologies of indigenous Brown people from Latin America. To Zavala, the term "Raza" is used "strategically as a broader socio-cultural and political identity, which includes the standpoint of indigenous and colonized Mestizo/Brown peoples from Latin America" (ibid). Since Zavala invokes identity as the central axis on which to define indigeneity and, crucially, the strategy to ensure that the reclamation of the "vantage point of colonized" people from Latin America is achieved, he naturally begins by asserting his Latin American identity (2013). To be sure, it is not that the mere invocation of his "Xicano identity" is itself an equation of identity and a particular mode of thought (ibid). Rather, it is the manner in which he uses his identity here as a way to legitimate his voice as representative of the "vantage point of the colonized Brown Latin American people" that betrays a) commitment to an ontological view of knowledge that perceives knowledge as different along identity lines and b) a commitment to the idea that such differences in ways of knowing remain true across different time periods.

The challenge, of course, is that the spirit of Zavala's (2013) argument is to ensure that decolonization is achieved. Yet, paradoxically, his attempts to achieve decolonization reproduce the containeri-zation of knowledge that was at the centre of the colonial process. Indeed, by holding onto the idea that there is a uniquely "Brown people's vantage point" that is fundamentally different from other people's modes of thought, he commits to the same ontological viewpoint that legitimated the claims of exclusive ownership to modes of thoughts that typified the colonial process. For, history has shown, the claims of exclusive ownership to modes of thoughts were simultaneously a key strategy as well as a product of the colonial process during which powerful groups claimed ownership to modes of thought based on asymmetrical dynamics rather than the existence of inherent differences on modes of thoughts by racial group. This is not to say that there have never been differences in dominant ways of knowing among particular groups at a particular time. Rather, the point here is that, knowledge has always been fluid and the dominant ways in which groups of people perceive of the world have historically been continuously (re)shaped by contact with others as opposed to merely developing in isolation as is suggested by the commitment to "authentic" modes of thought that typify race-centric decolonial reasoning (see Said, 1994). In fact, the calls for exclusive ownership of knowledge are at the core of colonial thought and should therefore not be at the center of strategies that are meant to challenge colonial reasoning. As postcolonial theorist and educator Aimé Césaire famously declared, "no race has a monopoly on beauty, intelligence and strength and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest" (Said, 1994 p.227). Thus, by insisting on ownership patterns of knowledge developed for colonial conquest, race-centric decolonial theorists are inadvertently reproducing colonial ideologies even beyond the colonial era.

Further, accepting that modes of thought are fundamentally racialized and that the existing knowledge production system has been producing white knowledge since the beginning of colonialism, how is it possible that black scholars whose training is dominated by white ideas can reasonably be able to decolonize the knowledge production process? In other words, is decolonization of knowledge production a mere reconfiguration of the personnel involved in the knowledge production process or is it the rejection of ideas of a colonial character? In truth, the reality is that, even as non-whites have been gradually increasing in the knowledge production process, the dominant ideas as well as the structures that constitute this process remain similar. The domination of particular colonial ideas against the backdrop of an increase in the number of non-whites in the academy continues to take place because knowledge production process involves complex ideological and structural elements that will not be fixed by merely changing the racial composition of the faculty. Racial identity of scholars is therefore just but one element within an otherwise complex knowledge production structure. Indeed, other elements of the

knowledge production process such as, patterns of ownership in the knowledge production sphere and the ideas underpinning the mode of production system within which the knowledge production sphere is embedded present a more promising decolonial path than merely rearranging the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic (Smith & Tivaringe, 2016, Chibber, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, while efforts to decolonize the knowledge production system are undoub-tedly still characterized by colo-nial ideologies that perpetuate asymmetrical structures within the knowledge production sphere, it is unproductive to ameliorate such asymmetries by reducing the structures that characterize this sphere me-

rely to those of a racial nature. This is a misdiagnosis that perpetuates the continued reproduction of the colonial thought via non-white and white academics committed to ideologies that justify asymmetries in social economic and political order. Furthermore, this misdiagnosis fragments the subaltern by fixating on mere racial identities when effective solidarity to decolonize could be waged across racial groups.

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