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Résumé de l'article

This piece argues that contemporary neoliberal UK universities are necessarily unable to enact decolonization owing to a contradiction between their business needs and a genuine commitment to the decolonial, which involves the complete dismantling of existing colonial discourse. Using the process of immanent critique modelled by Adorno, it is argued that the neoliberal university presents inherent contradictions that demand measurable knowledge, preordained by existing colonial epistemological boundaries. A scholar engaged in immanent critique may facilitate the potential for decolonial practices within, and against, the university apparatus.

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An Immanent Critique of Decolonization Discourse

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This piece argues that contemporary neoliberal UK universities are necessarily unable to enact decolonization owing to a contradiction between their business needs and a genuine commitment to the decolonial, which involves the complete dismantling of existing colonial discourse. Using the process of immanent critique modelled by Adorno, it is argued that the neoliberal university presents inherent contradictions that demand measurable knowledge, preordained by existing colonial epistemological boundaries. A scholar engaged in immanent critique may facilitate the potential for decolonial practices within, and against, the university apparatus.

Introduction

The contemporary neoliberal university in the UK is necessarily unable to enact a process of decolonization. What the university may do, however, is cultivate an intellectual environment that is ripe to discuss the ongoing pervasiveness of colonialism. In other words, instead of ten-point plans or toolkits to award "decoloniality" scores to be highlighted in "inclusive" marketing campaigns to attract historically underrepresented groups,[1] staff and students ought to undertake a relentless critique of the contemporary university apparatus. Such a critique of existing social issues must be immanent (Antonio, 1981), as opposed to transcendent. I argue that an immanent critique can be helpfully guided by the negative dialectics of the late critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno.

The initial section will outline the current approach by UK universities to decolonization, and how this is mired in inescapable contradictions and tensions. The second section will introduce Adorno's negative dialectics as a manner of immanent critique that may be employed in the service of a critical discourse concerning decolonization. The third and final section will reiterate how a teleological, positive, dialectic necessarily cannot satisfy a radical project of decolonization, and that projects that attempt to do so are unwitting "moves to innocence" (Mawhinny, 1998, p. 6), which, contrary to their explicit aims, invariably buttress the status quo.

Business As Usual

Critical race theory, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, diversity and inclusion, reducing attainment gaps between students of different ethnic backgrounds[2]: all have become seemingly interchangeable under the

[1] For example, see the "how to" guidance provided by my former employer, the University of Leeds: https://studenteddev.leeds.ac.uk/developing-practice/decolonising.
[2] https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps

umbrella term "decolonization." "Decolonize" has become a verb to be added to all manner of business-as-usual university processes (with an emphasis on *business*): "decolonize the curriculum," "decolonize marking criteria," "decolonize feedback forms," and so on. Within the contemporary UK neoliberal university, there is a focus upon cutting-edge, "value-for-money" experiences that can be marketed to as wide a demographic of potential "customers" as possible (Davies, 2016; Hayes and Wynyard, 2006). Pre-empting the neoliberal university, Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) perceptively observed in the late 1960s in the USA that the primary interest of a

> college-educated class of salaried administrators … is to secure more objects for service, management and control. For this purpose, the middle class needs a permanently expanding, dependent clientele and enough organization power to protect its function and expanding ranks (1968, p. 148).

In competition with other institutions in a global market of education, UK universities are, understandably, concerned with public image and branding. Decolonization, then, much like the wellbeing agenda that was aggressively promoted in UK higher education in years prior (Dhillon, 2018; Hayes & Ecclestone, 2008), has become an explicit business aim of the university, allowing it to project corporate social responsibility as part of its public image. Doing so in turn helps to attract a wide pool of applicants. Surely the irony is not lost on anyone that the explicit aim of attracting a diverse body of students, often from former actual colonies, comes straight from the colonialism 101 playbook.

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 had a ripple effect across the Atlantic Ocean and upon all facets of UK society, including education. The murder led to widespread protests, social demonstrations – for example, the toppling of the statue of merchant and slave owner Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020 – and a slew of university meetings and keynotes on issues of institutional racism, and the violent legacies of colonization and transatlantic slavery in particular. In my experience, all such discussions became conflated under the umbrella term "decolonization." This marked focus upon decolonization as a unifying theme brought to a crescendo research projects that had been building momentum since the Rhodes Must Fall protests which took place at the University of Oxford in March 2015. Scholars and student activists who had been researching in the field of decolonization since 2016 (for example, Bhambra, Nisancioglu & Dalia, 2018; Bhopal, 2016, 2018) shared important home truths with a wide audience; namely, that UK higher education is implicated in institutional racism and legacies of colonial thinking. Through op-ed pieces, podcasts, keynotes (hosted by WONKHE, among others[3]), and the like, students and staff from "BAME" backgrounds (the reductive "Black and Minority Ethnic" acronym employed in supposedly welcoming UK multicultural speak) were invited to share their experiences of institutional discrimination and outline the need for structural reform in staffing policies, student recruitment, and retention ("belonging" came up, a lot), and for accountable strategies for positive change. Overall, however – and notwithstanding laudable, collaborative, critical approaches to decolonization such as the University of Bristol's "decolonizing education" massive open online course (MOOC) – the consensus on what needed to be done was seemingly a disappointing utilitarian strategy of quasi-affirmative action: quotas and targets in terms of staff and student bodies, or in other words, metrics.[4] This outcome is rather timid in comparison with some decolonization projects and discussions that have been taking place in the US and Canada, as well as New Zealand (Aotearoa), which stress the importance of Indigenous studies, subalternity (Byrd & Rothberg, 2011), and legislative change beyond

[3] For example, a widely attended Black Lives Matter event hosted by WONKHE on 8 July 2020: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/black-lives-matter-recording-and-resources

[4] The contemporary Conservative cabinet is the most diverse in UK history (Shah, 2020) but by no means legislates for greater social inclusion and equity. For example, see the Sewell race report (March 2021), which has been used to propagate the notion that institutional racism does not exist within the UK (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021).

the classroom to address power imbalances and historical legacies of colonial violence (Grosfoguel, Hernández and Velásquez, 2016; Huygens, 2011).

Epistemic boundaries

Achille Mbembe (New Frame, 2019) observes that knowledge (the tried and tested business product of the university) is increasingly designed as a means of value extraction. Just consider, for example, how much research funding will be garnered by easily measurable and packable "decolonization" projects. That is not to say that researchers motivated to change processes in the service of greater equity and fairness are all cynical value extractors. However, regardless of individual morality, righteousness, and rose-tinted views of the supposed enlightening function of UK higher education, the contemporary corporate university machine will reduce critique and praxis to the status of commodity; if research and critique does not produce value (invariably economic surplus), it has no auditable place. When research does produce auditable value, this fact alone undermines the criticality of decolonial praxis. In effect, the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is undertaken by four UK higher education funding bodies and determines the allocation of funds, deems that research is appropriated back into a university's business model even when its content intends to dismantle said model.

In addition to the corporatization of university research (Barnett, 2017), the colonialism of the epistemic structure in which decolonizing research is supposed to take place essentially stymies the legitimacy of such critique. Foluke Adebisi (2020) deems universities and their disciplines "ill-equipped to centre unrepresented populations" by virtue of the fact that said disciplines have been complicit in creating such disparities. Philosophy, for example, is tainted by the whitewashing of knowledge by iconic thinkers such as Kant (covered in-depth via a critical race theory lens by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract*, from 1997). Adebisi (2020) adds that the neoliberal university "obscures its own complicity in creating and maintaining its own colonial knowledge hierarchies … Yet the neoliberal university can *only* survive through the colonial logics of commodification of space, nature, humanity and variably valued labour." This returns to my gambit: the neoliberal university *cannot* enact a decolonizing agenda. Instead of a crude, cynical, target-based approach to decolonization, I argue for the value of a negative dialectical approach of immanent critique. Whilst modest, it is an intellectually rigorous approach that maintains the possibility of the radically other in the face of instrumentally rational guiding narratives (Horkheimer, 1974) surrounding decolonization in the academy today. An astute thinker to guide this negative praxis is Adorno.

Wrong Life Cannot Be Lived Rightly

Adorno is, by most accounts, not a fun read; he is, however, a sobering one. A pithy dictum to summarize Adorno's determinately negative critical task is "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen," or, that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno, 1973, p. 39). As Raymond Geuss (2014) points out, in Adorno's sociological analysis, "what is at issue here is a structural feature of society, which makes a fully satisfactory life of complete consistency and sincerity impossible" (p. 185). Adorno's oeuvre is no cheery one.

Dialectics is a philosophical approach that deems that "nothing can be understood in isolation" (Adorno, 1993, p. 91). As such, dialectics may reveal omissions in any given discourse (Fox and O'Maley, 2018, p. 1,602). In terms of a decolonization agenda that is located within the neoliberal university, a negative dialectical approach is essential to a consistent critique that maintains philosophical rigour. Given that "actionism," or performative activism within the university, can only take place within pre-

established epistemic boundaries (Barnett, 2017), only a negative dialectical critique can entertain the possibility of a radically different perspective.

In the spirit of negative dialectics, immanent critique is Adorno's reworking of a Kantian antinomy to judge socio-cultural material by its own standards and ideals, and confront it with its own consequences. As Gillian Rose (1978) argues: "Marxist sociology is often considered to employ 'transcendent' theory, but Adorno seeks to show that materialist and dialectical criticism must be immanent" (p. 151). A criticism of such an approach driven by relentless negativity of existing conditions is that it lacks a redemptive moment, or a guiding positive telos. In other words, Adorno's critical task does not seek to realize a moment of redemptive truth. Instead, Adorno (1973) argues that "it lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope" (p. 406).

This determinately negative critical task is, at first glance, not obviously aligned with progressive plans for social improvement. Adorno's immanent critique is incommensurate with a clearly articulated approach on how to bring about progressive change. Instead of offering a checklist of what ought to be done to rectify social ills in the manner of a positivist like Auguste Comte, Adorno reworks Hegel's teleological dialectic (via Marx's dialectical materialism) into a determinately negative one: Adorno's critical task does not seek to realize a moment of positive telos, such as Absolute Spirit. Instead, Adorno follows F. H. Bradley's (1893) line of thought that "where everything is bad, it must be good to know the worst" (p. 3). That said, Adorno's task is no mere pessimistic one that resigns itself to quietism – quite the contrary. Because of the lack of immediate and obvious value of an Adornian line of critique, it flies in the face of the performance principle culture of the neoliberal university (MacDonald and Young, 2018, p. 531). Instead of token gestures, or "actionism" (rote unthinking activism), Adorno's mode of praxis is a humbling endeavour, with no telos or necessarily satisfactory outcome to guide it. Rather, negative praxis is fuelled by revealing tensions and contradictions in any given existing state of affairs; instrumental reason itself is on trial. Through immanent critique there lies the potential of revealing that which is radical. As Jan McArthur (2013) helpfully puts it: "critique that does not start with the answers to its own problems may hold a better chance of realising useful answers" (p. 144). In terms of "useful" answers in the context of decolonization, Adorno's negative dialectics has potential.

Complete Disorder

For Adorno, philosophy's task is to keep critical thinking alive, and to identify, through immanent critique, the contradictions that remain, in order to understand the nature of late capitalism (Tiedemann, 2003, p. 114). In this way, then, an Adornian immanent critique can be applied to a reading of decolonization from within the neoliberal university. This notion of immanent critique can also be retrospectively attributed to the critical task of the theorist of decolonization *par excellence*: Frantz Fanon.

Fanon describes decolonization as nothing short of a seismic shift in the entirety of the *Lebenswelt* (or "life-world"). Decolonization, for Fanon, cannot be understood as anything but a "program of complete disorder" (1963, p. 63) which necessarily cannot be realized as a teleological result of "magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding" (1963, p. 63). Furthermore, decolonization, in Fanon's reading, "cannot be understood, it 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" (ibid., p. 36). In other (Adornian) words, Fanon renders the potentiality of a discourse concerning decolonization through a historical, dialectical-materialist reading of existing conditions. Crucially, however, in rendering decolonization as "complete disorder," Fanon's reading is commensurate with Adorno's negative dialectics; there is no positive (well-ordered) telos to be reached through working groups for progressive change. Instead, what decolonization entails is relentless immanent critique to reveal antinomies in existing, and necessarily colonial, discourse.

To reiterate, a positive dialectic towards a telos in terms of decolonization cannot satisfy radical criteria. In contemporary discussions in the neoliberal university, "decolonization" as a verb, metaphor, or general catch-all term to cover anything socially progressive is problematic. Such a reductive reading nullifies the radicalness of the discourse, and instead renders it as business as usual. That is, "decolonization" becomes just another attractive public relations buzzword to help recruit, retain, and include as wide a pool of applicants from across the globe (ideally from abroad to bring in inflated international fees) as possible. Rendering decolonization as a tool of public relations to garner greater student admissions, after a manner of Fanon's "friendly understanding" in the service of supposed mutual benefit and measurable value added, problematically serves to extend innocence to those enmeshed within, and who have benefited from, colonialism.

If an instructive noun can be ascribed to decolonization, the above demonstrates that the only appropriate term is Fanon's "disorder." For it is the business-as-usual order that decolonization opposes, from within the corporate university, via immanent critique. Any serious discourse surrounding decolonization must necessarily commence with recognition of complicity. Any subsequent critique must therefore be guided by relentless criticality through a negative dialectic. The theorist and activist, then, cannot claim a transcendental Archimedean standpoint.

Moves to Innocence

Immanent critique seeks to reveal inherent contradictions in discourse. Furthermore, such critique involves the theorist and activist recognizing their complicity in situations they desire to change. "Moves to innocence" (Mawhinney, 1998, p. 6) abound in the university, with often white, liberal staff and students who desire to be on the "right" side of history, who use inclusive and "woke" vernacular, and, crucially, who employ strategies and undertake ostensibly decolonizing work in attempts to assuage feelings of guilt or responsibility. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) deem that such scholars invariably "gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware" (p. 10). Ultimately, however, owing to a culture in which knowledge is a marketable product, such moves to innocence unfortunately, and necessarily, satisfy the status quo, just in a palatable guise.

The neoliberal university, instead of supporting decolonization as it purports to do, rather seeks to permit more underrepresented groups to become pretenders to colonized seats: more "BAME," and different genders, nationalities, etc. "Progress," for Adorno, as for Fanon, does not equate to integrating a more visually diverse cohort into the corporate university apparatus (McArthur, 2013, p. 136). The supposed progressive optics of having a more diverse student and staff body stems from a colonized ontology; that is, markers of identity (ethnicity, gender, and so on) are commodified and used to support measurable agendas that merely serve to buttress the status quo: "freedom to choose an ideology, which always reflects economic coercion, everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 135).

Conclusion

Decolonization involves the "complete disorder" of the existing, colonial discourse. It can be best realized through immanent critique of this discourse by employing a negative dialectical approach to concepts. As Adebisi (2020) argues, a scholar concerned with decolonization may cultivate the potentiality for decolonial thought within the university apparatus, but this potential *cannot* be deemed decolonization itself, for to do so is invariably colonization of the very concept. In the contemporary UK neoliberal university, critique is only permitted in many "actionist" circles, be they protest groups outside the university buildings or decolonization working groups inside them, provided it is

"constructive." If the theorist or activist is unable to outline measurable plans for change, such critique is considered unhelpful. That this is the case is wholly commensurate with a neoliberal university audit culture concerned with the production of measurable value extraction from knowledge (New Frame, 2019). Within this positivist culture of knowledge production, concerned with measurable outcomes to be used in attractive promotional campaigns, immanent critique is unfashionable; it appears too theoretically indulgent, and offers no overt material outcomes that could potentially withstand the cannibalizing effect of the neoliberal university. However, it is my gambit that the theorist and activist entangled in the neoliberal university must resist a piecemeal approach towards a neatly packable, commodified rendering of supposed decolonial practice. They must, instead, expend their energies on a relentless immanent critique of the discourses surrounding decolonization. Eschewing a transcendental Archimedean standpoint in favour of immanent critique in the dirt of the discourse, the negative dialectician may render apparent the inherent contradictions of the neoliberal university that demands measurable knowledge, pre-ordained by existing colonial epistemic boundaries. If there are progressive, and even decolonial, lasting outcomes to such critique, then that is, of course, a welcome outcome (Gopal, 2021). Whether this can be the case within the context of the neoliberal institution is, unfortunately, in doubt.

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