

Decolonising the market space: An intersectional approach to neoclassical economics

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“What Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalizing and universalizing coloniality as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted, and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies” (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2013, 10).

Coloniality’s epochal condition, which is racially hierarchised, imperialistic, colonialist, Euro-American centric, Christian, heteronormative, patriarchal and violent, categorises people to notions and binaries of civilised against primitive, cis against trans, heterosexual against homosexual, developed against underdeveloped – as well as black against white (Gatsheni-Ndlovu 2013, 11).

This order of importance, which we find the world over, is as a result of colonial beliefs and the need to entrench white supremacist ideas. These are the people responsible for coloniality and the existence of an asymmetrical systemic power structure.

The recognition of universities as sites of the perpetuation of this oppression is the key reason for this article because western investigations into social realities are heavily conditioned and distorted by limited paradigms of thought and experience. With a lack of diverse perspectives, we fall into the trap of what Vandana Shiva’s book (1993) calls the “monocultures of the mind”.

Unfortunately, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy as Eurocentrism has hegemony over all other knowledge systems. According to Shiva (1993), this is the root cause of why we have pitted equity against ecology and sustainability against justice. As a result, this has had devastating effects the world over as “the knowledge and power nexus (inherent in the dominant system) is associated with a set of values based on power which emerged with the rise of commercial capitalism. It generates inequalities and domination by the way such knowledge is generated and structured, the way it is legitimised, and alternatives are delegitimised, and by the way in which such knowledge transforms nature and society” (Shiva

1993). This is contrary to the process of knowledge construction, which Reviere (2001) says should not take precedence over the well-being of the people being researched.

In terms of the study of economics, its elitism disempowers and silences the voices of non-experts. Currently, the analysis and advice of experts are often comprised of their position in the economy, which is hierarchised in terms of their race, gender and class – often leaving a majority of ordinary citizens in a worse-off position.

I have come to believe this is as a result of how the economics curriculum is structured. This kind of economic literacy sounds more like brainwashing than education as it only seeks to regurgitate, perpetuate and to uphold the complements of capitalism which are inequality, poverty and exploitation.

A decolonial teaching of economics would be one which helps meet human and environmental needs. This teaching will usher in an alternative economic system motivated directly by the desire to improve the human and ecological condition, rather than filling this exasperated hunger for profit. This then begs the question: what is needed to decolonise and transform the neoclassical economy?

There are three identifiable structural challenges that need to be looked into that would contribute to the re-imagination and, ultimately, to the decolonisation of the economics curriculum at the Nelson Mandela University, namely, the curriculum, academics and the university's institutional culture.

Curriculum

According to Muller (2017), the fundamental source of the problems with the economics undergraduate curriculum is that it is not orientated toward providing a well-rounded economics knowledge and qualification that will serve us, as students, well after graduation. It deliberately prepares and/or selects a very small proportion of undergraduates for postgraduate studies (Muller 2017). This, I would believe, would be a consequence of gatekeeping by certain academics. This gatekeeping is explained later on in this article.

He mentions that another identifiable matter is the fact that it does not provide a good return for the amount of money paid for it. This is mainly because a lack of well-coordinated accountability avenues, in terms of teaching and learning quality, ensures that this epistemic injustice continues.

This can be seen through the textbooks that are used to teach economics at the Nelson Mandela University. The textbooks de-link the Mandela University student from their social context as the books, which are used to teach, are from the United States. This results in a very limited substantive engagement with the content by the students.

These particular books also endorse and are conveying vehicles of the status quo – a status quo that has been problematised by students during the “Fees Must Fall” movements as being colonial in nature. The “colonial” aspect is found in the nature that curricula “[have] been developed based on superiority of one culture/society/race/group over another, [considered an] imposition of foreign knowledge without regard to local contributions or circumstances, ahistorical analysis of current phenomena taught in such a way that portrays some cultures/societies/races/group as inherently superior to others and/or without regard for the experiences of groups that have suffered discrimination, and lack relevance to the problems and interests of local economies” (Muller 2017).

These textbooks deliberately conceal the messy histories of South African intellectual progress and reframe them as linear development towards some Eurocentric form of superior knowledge. This is compounded by the late introduction of the history of economic thought and economic history as it is only introduced in the third-year level of studying. The lack of critical reading, thinking and writing skills honed from a first-year level is also a problem.

Academics

The transformation of South Africa’s higher education institutions does not only have to do with becoming more representative of the country’s population demographics. This is because “transformation must interrogate the nature of privilege, the distribution of power in society and the process through which social exclusion is maintained” (Soudien 2010).

“A particular problem is the degree to which representativity masks the continued presence of racism or sexism within the university space, and the emergence of difficult manifestations of exclusion that representativity by itself is unable to resolve. This is maintained by the introduction of academics who still seek to uphold the cultural and historical decision-making of problematic historically white universities” (Booi, *et al* 2017).

This, therefore, comes with stigmatisation. It can also persist within a representative entity, therefore, alienating and excluding certain individuals – mostly black and female academics who seek to disrupt the historical and cultural realities deeply entrenched within these institutions.

Institutional culture

An institutional culture encompasses values and behaviours that contribute to the unique and psychological environment of an organisation.

In the absence of institutional cultures that place enough value on the university’s fundamental societal role in transmitting knowledge, teaching critical thinking and engaging social challenges, even with rhetoric or dialogue, is not going to lead to fundamental improvements. It is important that a university’s economics department’s research agenda are geared towards a decolonial teaching of economics. This, however, is not the case as financial incentives for universities do not encourage high-quality undergraduate teaching and post-graduate financial incentives are not geared towards an endorsement of a decolonial teaching of economics.

“It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that undergraduate [as well as post-graduate] students may be “indoctrinated” with conservative, free-market notions of how economies and societies function, even if that indoctrination occurs as the result of a variety of different dynamics and incentives rather than explicit, deliberate intent on the part of institutions” (Muller 2017, 90).

Solutions

The current curriculum needs to be structured that is fixated on the idea of creating economists that are highly socially aware. This can be achieved through an intersectional or multidisciplinary approach, which includes art, history, sociology and law, in the teaching of

the economics curriculum. This would challenge the “binary that only class relates to economic interests while gender, race, citizenship and sexuality relate merely to issues of identity” (Aboobaker 2016).

Students and those who pay fees should add more pressure for the following:

1. A more targeted and descriptive framework, which the academics who are appointed by the faculty, need to fulfil.
2. A compulsory experiential portfolio inclusive of dialogue attendances, reviews thereof, critical readings and writing regarding the application of economic models to the South African context-related matters. This portfolio ought to span across the course of a student’s undergraduate degree.
3. The creation of an incubator which entails collaborative work between the economics department and different sectors of the economy (government, non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations, co-operations, public and private enterprises) that is research orientated which aims to bridge the gap between what the society needs and what the society is offered. This could potentially assist the markets to cater to the needs or could foster entrepreneurship for various students and/or the society at large. This research must be of such a calibre that it could potentially contribute to economic policy, even from an undergraduate level and it must be community-based.

Conclusion

Given the overarching importance of the economy to our social conditions, people are entitled to more genuine and far-reaching forms of economic democracy and accountability. “Economics has an important role in the analysis of the contemporary national and global order, it thus holds an important role in questions of ideological orientation and strategy for social movements [and developments]. An intersectional economic theory holds the prospect of informing the development of a more complete analysis and strategy for social movements that speak to broad coalitions of oppressed groups interested in furthering progressive agendas” (Aboobaker 2016).

For an intersectional economic theory to work, constant collaborative work between communities, students, institutions of higher learning, social justice movements, as well as public and private business, is needed. This will disrupt the very problematic binary thinking of limiting economics to a scientific approach as this reinforces the colonial aspect of neoclassical economics, which will fall foul of an analysis that has any relevance to the problems and interests of local communities.

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