

## *Higher Education for the Public Good:*

### *Its Entanglement With Decolonial Possibilities<sup>1</sup>*

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My talk today is about how to bring together two sets of arguments that have surprisingly not been thought together in the decolonisation debates. **SLIDE 2** On the one hand, it is the literature on higher education as a public good—what this means, what it implies, why it is important; on the other hand, it is the demand for decolonizing higher education—why it is necessary, how it should be done more effectively and strategically and so on . The argument that I will advance today **SLIDE 3** is that that decolonization is not merely an effort to resist processes of colonization that are still going on in universities. Rather, decolonizing higher education is a process that *is* to the public interest and the wider transformation of a society, because it dismantles the normative ethical and political limits of higher education as know it, and explores alternative possibilities that promote the public good. I am clearly not referring only to the case of South Africa, because I see decolonisation as a wider ethical and political project that concerns universities and therefore, societies, around the globe. So I am arguing for decolonisation as a wider and global project because knowledge in many places around the world is colonized in the sense that knowledge from the colonial centers is consistently treated as powerful, it is privileged over local knowledges and it persistently produces unjust effects of power.

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So, let me begin by saying that higher education is widely assumed to be a major social good. In his 1929 essay entitled ‘National-Mindedness and International-Mindedness’ George Herbert Mead wrote that, **SLIDE 4** “To be interested in the public good we must be disinterested, that is, not interested in goods in which our personal selves are wrapped up” (p. 392). This statement, so I believe, provides the philosophical foundation and reflects the passionately opposing views that still accompany debates about the way individual and common good are understood in Western societies since Aristotle’s time. What is the public good? Who defines it? Where does personal interest end? And of course, the question I am adding today: What do decolonization debates have to do with the public good?

Two features of Aristotelian views are worthwhile to consider, because they provide the ground for the opposing views that have developed since then. **SLIDE 5** The first one is that the individual person must integrate the various goods and pursuits that make up his or her daily affairs into the overall good that is happiness or flourishing and that gives life its end; the second is that these practices, institutions and actions must be coordinated by the larger human community (Lewis, 2005). Aristotle’s idea of a ‘public’ emphasizes that as a deliberative body, the public seeks to advance a common good and thus it is more than the sum of the individuals who compose it. **SLIDE 6** Aristotle’s idea of a public also concerns a shared identity—membership in a polis—as well as a shared fate (Feinberg, 2012). Only those who are conscious of this shared identity and who are able to put private interest aside in deliberating about collective action are truly interested in the public good.

Education in general, and higher education in particular, are unavoidably entangled in debates concerning what counts as public good—for example, when it comes to the purpose of

universities, especially in light of contemporary neoliberal interests around the globe.<sup>2</sup> Thus

**SLIDE 7** if educational institutions, including universities, serve public good, they should (ideally) be defined and evaluated by their unique goal to *renew* the public by providing individuals with the skills, dispositions and perspectives required to engage with others about their shared interests and common fate (Feinberg, 2012). Yet, what this implies for higher education is not always clear or uncontested, especially in relation to the possibility that universities serve public good at the same time that they serve their private (e.g. financial) interests.

Furthermore, what higher education for public good means in the context of efforts toward decolonisation has clearly material, ethical, political and epistemic dimensions, which together shape social relations and enshrine categories that are then used to justify: occupation of Indigenous land; claims about the universality of Western thought; capitalist and neoliberal relations and modes of production; possessive individualism; and the very concept of race (Stein & Andreotti, 2017). Under the broad umbrella of higher education for the public good, there might exist many paradoxes, disagreements and diverse visions for how decolonizing possibilities can contribute to the public good. These competing visions, I argue, should become part of decolonisation debates, namely, whether decolonisation projects overlap with, are reducible to, or are incommensurable with other justice and public good projects. Consequently,

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<sup>2</sup> A parenthesis here: Generally speaking, neoliberalism emphasizes three things: 1) a commitment to individual liberty and a reduced state; 2) an ideology against government intervention; and, 3) a belief that market forces should be allowed to be self-regulating.

any effort to address decolonisation and higher education necessarily entails the exploration not only of the different understandings of decolonisation but also of public good itself.

While higher education is certainly considered to be a good, there have been considerable debates around the world as to whether or not higher education itself is a public good.

Traditionally, the debate goes like this: On one hand, there is the view that higher education is a public good, because every individual who benefits from higher education can potentially contribute to the common good with the skills, dispositions and perspectives he or she acquires. Several countries, for example, subsidize higher education through such means as grants and student loans. On the other hand, there is objection against public funding of higher education on the basis of the idea that not everyone will attend a public university or benefit from this funding. These debates raise further questions such as: SLIDE 8 Whose interest does higher education really serve? How does funding higher education contribute to societal transformation? Or even further: How should higher education for the public good be like in a society characterized by gross inequalities such as South Africa?

Southern thinkers like Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell argues that we need to move beyond the neoliberal, managerial model that has become dominant in contemporary university systems around the world. Connell's writings recognize the complexities of education in social, cultural and political terms, while pushing the boundaries of how to translate theoretical discussions on justice into practical, everyday conditions. SLIDE 9 One of Connell's constructs that is particularly valuable in the case of decolonizing efforts in South Africa is the concept of 'curricular justice'—or cognitive justice to use de Sousa Santos' term. I would argue that recognizing different manifestations of social (in)justice—of which curricular justice is just

one of them—is an important task in decolonisation efforts to interrogate the complex relationships among inequality, transformation and higher education.

What I hope to discuss next, then, is how curricular justice in higher education is related to social justice and therefore, to the public good. In other words, my aim is to suggest that curricular justice must be accompanied by social justice and as a corollary, curricular justice is a form of, and leads to, social justice and transformation.

Connell wrote a number of seminal books and papers (e.g. Connell, 1992, 1993, 1994) emphasizing that hegemonic curriculum and pedagogical practices are integral to the reproduction of inequality in educational outcomes. In particular, Connell suggests that the basis for a curriculum that does not perpetuate inequalities is the principle of ‘curricular justice’ **SLIDE 10**; a strategic focus on the interests of the least advantaged groups of students. This focus, argues Connell, is in contrast to the contemporary mainstream curricula in most countries’ schools and universities, which prioritize the interests of the most privileged. Although the construct of curricular justice was originally based on a rather narrow interpretation of curriculum and a focus on compulsory schooling, this construct is increasingly being applied to the higher education sector. Thus, the adapted construct of curricular justice entails three ‘design principles’ that ought to be considered in higher education too.

First, a just curriculum, as Connell (2017) points out, does not simply reflect the knowledge and culture of the least advantaged but rather requires the critique of all knowledge claims, because the least advantaged groups may have adapted to a destructive situation. In other words, the notion of curricular justice emphasizes not only the development of knowledge through the recognition of the interests of the least advantaged, but it also emphasizes *how* this

knowledge may be critical and useful to the communities of people higher education institutions seek to address.

The second principle, then, is the participation of the least advantaged groups in a democratic process of deliberation and decision-making in higher education rather than a neoliberal, managerial process that ignores the harsh realities and ways of being of traditionally marginalized groups. The FeesMustFall movement in South Africa is an example of the social struggle that is often needed for curricular justice in and around higher education institutions. Finally, the third principle is the development of policies and pedagogies that are geared toward equitable outcomes and prevent the historical production of inequality. For example, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are to be approached in ways that provide productive practices taking into consideration the viewpoint of the least advantaged, thus creating learning spaces that incorporate curricular justice as a key criterion for academic excellent.

In general, Connell's construct of curricular justice advances clearly and thoroughly the idea that higher education holds the premise of contributing to social justice and democratic citizenship rather than being a vehicle for perpetuating social inequalities. The construct of curricular justice is particularly relevant to decolonisation debates because a just curriculum has to take into consideration how knowledge is generated in the colonial encounter. So what does it mean to decolonize the curriculum in the wake of colonial rule or apartheid in order to promote curricular justice? Or to put this differently: How can curricular justice be advanced through decolonization efforts in higher education?

In his recent book titled *As By Fire*, Jonathan Jansen (2017) summarizes six different conceptions of decolonisation **SLIDE 11** when it comes to the subject of knowledge as

embedded in the school or university curriculum. I think it's worthwhile to consider those as different ways of advancing curricular justice. So here they are:

1. *Decolonisation as the decentering of European knowledge*: This does not mean to get rid of European content—values, ideals, achievements and so on—but rather to critique and question European legacies and their epistemological, ethical, political and ontological consequences around the globe. It also means replacing Europe with Africa at the center of the curriculum.
2. *Decolonisation as the Africanization of knowledge*: This means a step further, that is, for example, teaching and learning through the African languages rather than through the colonial language, English.
3. *Decolonisation as additive-inclusive knowledge*: This is a soft-version of decolonisation and entails the addition of content (e.g. African Studies or authors) in the curriculum.
4. *Decolonisation as critical engagement with settled knowledge*: This meaning of decolonization focuses less on repositioning or replacing the existing curriculum than with empowering students to engage critically with knowledge that is taken for granted.
5. *Decolonisation as encounters with entangled knowledges*: This meaning of decolonisation acknowledges that knowledges are entangled; there are no pure colonizer or colonized knowledges, but rather knowledges are intertwined. As Jonathan Jansen writes: “This reality of entangled knowledges is especially valid in post-1994 South Africa, where former enemies quite literally breathe down

each other's necks in shared social spaces such as schools and universities, and engage with the same troubled knowledge contained in the curriculum" (2017, p. 162).

6. *Decolonisation as repatriation of occupied knowledge (and society)*: This is a 'hard version' of decolonisation that demands the repatriation of land and occupied knowledge to those from whom it was stolen. From this perspective reconciliation and decolonization are considered incommensurable, because decolonisation is not about pampering settlers and accommodating their needs in the curriculum, but raising critical consciousness about giving back the stolen land.

These six concepts of decolonisation are not necessarily incommensurable but they may be complementary to one another in articulating a decolonizing university that advances curricular justice for the public good—that is, **SLIDE 12** a university that does not simply charge fees and grants degree, or even poses some rudimentary challenges to the neoliberal orientation of many contemporary universities, but rather defines itself fundamentally as a university that equips its students with skills toward the applied practice of decolonization (La Paperson, 2017).

A major issue, then, as to what is in the public good and how it can be promoted in higher education through a just curriculum becomes a matter of a critical approach towards colonial manifestations of knowledge. In criticizing neoliberal and managerial perspectives in higher education, for example, the construct of curricular justice rehabilitates the political role of higher education as a practice and an institution that joins the struggle for social justice, inclusion and



care for the least advantaged. However, it is less a matter of returning to Aristotle's definition of the public good, as it has been outlined earlier, but more of recognizing that what we take as higher education for the public good—while integrating private interests when it comes to the purpose of universities—is a matter of ongoing social, political and historical creation and deliberation. The public good, for example, according to the notion of curricular justice, has to be the outcome of a diversity of perspectives that take into consideration conceptions of access to higher education in the South African context and the system's progress toward the quality of outcomes for all learners, rather than simply being imposed by powerful private interests. **SLIDE 13** Democratic forms of deliberation, reflexivity, criticality, care, humanity and hopefulness are some of the ideas that are central to a notion of public good helping higher education students and educators explore crucial questions of autonomy, solidarity and the care of vulnerable others (e.g. see Leibowitz, 2012).

These ideas arise against a backdrop of forces which continue to reproduce particular forms of power and social inequalities all around the world. The concept of curricular justice suggests that higher education can make an important contribution towards social transformation, but for this to happen there has to be institutional transformation at the higher education level too. Such transformation demands rethinking and reframing of concepts such as the public (vs. private) good, social justice, democratic deliberation, and decolonial possibilities and how they are relevant to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. I focus now on three critical issues that create opportunities for this rethinking and reframing to take place. These issues, which I briefly discuss below, are: **SLIDE 14** the reconceptualization of public good; the different conceptualizations of social justice; and, the value of disruptive and discomforting pedagogies for democratic deliberation.

**SLIDE 15** The first issue is the reconceptualization of public good. For example, in defining public good in the context of South Africa, there are concerns about how a public good can be identified when there are not only conflicting interests in the society, but also traumas carried from unresolved issues in the apartheid era (see Leibowitz et al., 2012). Given these challenges, one way to think of ‘a public’ is not, as Aristotle did, as a group of friends committed to a common good, but as a group of strangers who may even be resentful of each other and who carry the emotional burden of the past, yet they are tied together by consciousness of a common fate (see Williams, 2003). The public, then, in this context includes individuals and groups with separate affiliations and identities, even with different private interests, who are traumatized by the past in variable manners, yet who are connected by common concerns and a common future, and whose membership in this public overlaps with political citizenship, but this citizenship is not the same because they don’t have the same agency (see Feinberg, 2012). At issue, then, is how much higher education can contribute so that people learn to act as citizens in a democracy that promotes social justice. Empirical work in higher education around the world demonstrates how difficult this task is to achieve, because past traumas and present inequalities are deeply embedded in how people come to see, understand and live citizenship. In addition, new needs and private interests, as a result of neoliberal economies, further complicate the public role of universities. Higher education can make a contribution towards this direction in that it can indeed address the various tensions of citizenship (tensions among egalitarian aims and unequal outcomes, for example), and provide access to the language, the capabilities and the practices required for democratic deliberation and social transformation (see Borman, Danzig & Carcia, 2012). As Singh points out, “The re-insertion of public good issues into the notion of higher education responsiveness requires the identification of a series of strategic choices for higher

education” (2012, p. 10). These strategic choices will have to also consider how the public good can be reconceptualized in ways that promote the vision of social justice by fostering decolonizing, disruptive and hopeful teaching and learning spaces. This idea does not imply that universities’ private interests are completely rejected or demonized; however, if universities are really interested in strengthening their public role, they cannot ignore demands for social justice.

**SLIDE 16** The second issue, of course, concerns the different conceptualizations of social justice. Research shows, argue Hill and her colleagues (Hill et al., 2012) in their review of research on the access to education in South Africa a few years ago, that there are increasingly complex conceptualizations of access to education and its implications for the educational opportunities and trajectories of disadvantaged groups. These authors suggest that notions of *distributive justice*—that is, emphasis on equality of opportunity and equality of outcome—are not enough to understand whether educational inequalities are successfully addressed in South Africa. Their suggestion is that we pay attention to the ways that *relational justice* is manifest in the society—that is, how the relationships which structure the society, such as the practices and procedures that govern both microlevel relationships and the organization of institutions (Gewirtz, 1998) such as higher education, really incorporate aspects of social justice such as recognition and respect. Connell’s notion of curricular justice, then, has to consider specifically how it is entangled with relational justice and creates spaces in higher education that nurture the values of relationships, care, compassion, respect, and solidarity. Collectively, these different manifestations of justice strengthen curricular justice as a critical resource for analyzing issues of power in social relations at both the micro and macro levels (Hill et al., 2012). At the same time, different manifestations of justice highlight that there are limitations of any approach to

distributive or relational or curricular justice frameworks to explain access in a complex social, cultural and political context without accounting for issues of agency.

**SLIDE 17** Finally, the third issue has to do with acknowledging the value of disruptive and discomfoting pedagogical approaches (e.g. see Boler, 1999, 2004; Boler & Zembylas, 2003) at the higher education level. Recent literature discusses the emotional tensions, ethical dilemmas and transformative possibilities of using such pedagogies in post-conflict societies (e.g. see Leibowitz et al., 2012; Zembylas, 2012). Discomfoting pedagogical approaches require considerable vulnerability and thus the ethical responsibility of educators becomes a complex issue, yet one that needs to be boldly addressed in the future. Many educators are concerned by the institutional and normative restrictions of using critical pedagogies in the classroom and admit that there is less and less room in it to negotiate the ethics or politics proposed by critical pedagogies (such as pedagogies of discomfort or disruptive and decolonizing pedagogies) (Zembylas, 2015). These observations about the ethical, institutional and normative restrictions show the complexity of handling difficult emotional knowledge in a post-traumatic society and why it is not always productive to address difficult knowledge on the basis of a pre-determined collectivity that reiterates ‘we’ and ‘they’ distinctions. When examined through the lens of a post-traumatic context, it becomes clearer how and why certain features of pedagogic discomfort concern students and educators beyond divisions of the world into rival camps (e.g. ‘oppressors’ and ‘victims’). Students and educators come into the classroom carrying their troubled knowledge about “conquest and humiliation, struggle and survival, suffering and resilience, poverty and recovery, black and white” as Jonathan Jansen (2009, p. 361) writes. Unsettling this troubled knowledge demands emotional effort, careful listening to each other’s traumatic

experiences, and explicit discussion of the potential and the harm that troubled knowledge stimulates.

The value of pedagogic discomfort in post-traumatic contexts cannot be overstated though. This process should not be assumed to be always already transformative, and beyond question. In other words, there are no guarantees for change in the social and political status quo; a pedagogy of discomfort, especially in light of the tensions identified above, demands time and realistic choices about what can and what cannot be achieved. Needless to say, not all students will respond in the same way or benefit from pedagogic discomfort in the same manner. Some may adopt some sort of change, others may resist, and still others may experience distress (Kumashiro, 2002). Therefore, the concern here is not simply about overcoming resistance or motivating students who express apathy or hostility; “it is, rather, a pedagogical commitment to locate, interrogate, and engage troubled knowledge... in ways that permit disruption of received authority” as Jansen (2009, p. 267) points out.

**SLIDE 18** You may be wondering at this point: To what extent is it possible to decolonize higher education institutions that are supported by the nation-State and capital? To what extent can universities *really* serve as spaces in which decolonization projects are imagined and enacted? If universities were created and adapted to support a colonial order of knowledge and tend to reproduce our existing social system, to what extent can these institutions be transformed without larger social transformations? What intervention approaches might neither reproduce the colonial order nor contest it using colonial terms? (Stein & Andreotti, 2017) In other words, what I am asking is: how can colonial universities become disloyal to colonialism for the public good?

The remainder of my talk revisits Stein and Andreotti's (2017, pp. 373-374) three critical approaches that could serve as responses to my questions and take into consideration the issues outlined earlier **SLIDE 19**.

1. The first approach entails both individual and institutional interventions focusing on proportional representation, advocating primarily for increased numbers of low-income or Black students and faculty, and supplementing existing curricula with non-Western perspectives. In other words, this approach aims at enhanced diversity and inclusion of difference into existing institutions and it might be characterized as a *soft reform approach*, because it lacks structural analysis and ignores the uneven distribution of power, wealth and opportunity across race. In relation to the conceptualization of social justice outlined earlier, there is no redistribution, but merely some form of recognition.
2. The second approach entails systemic analyses of the creation of inequalities and is characterized by recognition of the epistemological hegemony of Western knowledge and the harms done by existing institutional structures and logics that reproduce racial and economic inequalities. This approach is a more radical one, because it takes steps to disrupt colonial structures within the university and promote decolonization practices, yet it falls short in that it may also reproduce some parts of the system, as it is difficult to disrupt all colonial elements at once.
3. The third approach is the most radical of all as it emphasizes the need to dismantle the structures that orient the university itself; so this is a wider transformative project that challenges higher education as we know it, how it's

funded and regulated by the nation-State and capital, and the complicities that result from conflicting desires for decolonization *and* for fulfilment of the promises of the colonial order etc.

While these three approaches are theorized as distinct, they are not incommensurable, but we can see them in a continuum, so in practice we make strategic use of these different approaches in each context, depending on what is possible and desirable within any given situation. So, the million dollar question for you today is: Which of these approaches or combination of them can strategically be more effective for the decolonization and transformation project at NMU? How do you know this?

To conclude now: Given the relationship between curricular justice and social justice outlined earlier in my talk, decolonizing the curriculum cannot happen outside the pursuit of social justice. Decolonisation, then, is not an esoteric business of transforming the university. It is rather a public process of transformation that happens at different layers of intervention simultaneously and thus it is a matter of public good. A decolonizing project of higher education is about a collective rethink and action of higher education for public good around the world, not about dividing South Africa and other universities or dividing Southern and Western universities in the global peripheries. If we want to go beyond simply addressing the symptoms of contemporary problems to address the root causes of colonialism both in the colonial centers and its former or post colonies, then we will need to engage in deeper examinations that address not only the epistemological but also the ethical, political and ontological frameworks in which higher education is situated. Interventions are needed at all possible layers. Ultimately, a decolonial perspective forces us both within higher education institutions and beyond to think deeply not just about the epistemological but the ethical, political and ontological question of

what it means to create universities that equip students with skills toward decolonization for the public good.

As Alexis Shotwell (2016) argues in his book titled *Against Purity*, “Political transformation is not an intellectual exercise, but instead is a visceral, emotional, commonsensical refiguration—that when we engage with [efforts to enact social change] we are moved on many levels, only some of them rational and conceptual” (p. 186). In other words, intellectual work is necessary and valuable, but in itself it cannot lead us somewhere different. Erica Burman (2012) argued too that, “there is no way we are going to intellectually reason our way out of coloniality, in any conventional academic sense” (p. 117).

We need to rebuild relational justice as an important aspect of social justice. **SLIDE 21**  
Can our universities become one of the many spaces in which to make this possible, without assuming that such work can even be free from complicity in colonial harm? (Stein & Andreotti, 2017)