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“Free, Decolonised Education” – A Lesson from the South African Student Struggle

In October 2015 I travelled to South Africa for the first time, visiting Witwatersrand University (Johannesburg), University of Cape Town (UCT), and Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Rhodes was my first stop, and I knew relatively little about an institution I would soon find out had been renamed by students The University Currently Called Rhodes. As we pulled up, my eyes were drawn to the grand, whitewashed archway over the entrance to the university’s campus. On it, in thick, dark spray-paint, stood the words Black Power. Like many universities across the country, Rhodes students occupied campus buildings, marched on management meetings and struggled in solidarity with university staff. Earlier that year, RhodesMustFall, a UCT campaign against a statue of the British colonialist, turned into a movement against the imperialism he represented. For the first time since the anti-apartheid movement, South African students were grabbing international headlines, as they struggled for universal access to an education which does not reproduce the imperial logic their parents’ generation fought to dismantle. As geographers, particularly those based in the old centre of Empire, how can our work be used to dismantle colonialism and its legacies?

“A Proper Degree of Terror”

In 1811, John Graham, a Scottish corporal in the British Army, led a coalition of British regulars and Boer commandos into an area of land on the Eastern Cape of South Africa, inhabited by the amaXhosa. Graham’s task was to clear the land of people in preparation for white settlement. In a letter to George III, he informed the King that the amaXhosa people had been pushed beyond the Cape Colony’s frontiers using a ‘proper degree of terror’. Such terror consisted of shooting women and children who attempted to flee, as well as the destruction of crops in order to starve out any survivors. The land was renamed Grahamstown, and like much of the nation, implemented a system of rule that subjugated black Africans, eventually formalised through apartheid (MacLennan 1986).

It would be nearly a century until a generous endowment from the Rhodes Trust would lead to the establishment of the university which goes by the same name. Rhodes University was an all-white institution during the period of apartheid. During the 1950s it was briefly affiliated to Fort Hare (a higher educational institution for black Africans), but these ties were quickly severed by the ruling apartheid government. Today, 54 per cent of Rhodes’ undergraduate population is black (despite constituting 86 per cent of the population in the Eastern Cape), and whites constitute 38 per cent of undergraduates (while constituting 4.7 per cent in the region).

When I visited Rhodes University in 2015, I was struck by how spaces were contested by colonial and decolonial symbols. A large, heavy wooden door led into an imposing old social science building; the words Black Pain were spray-painted across one side. It was here that the students had begun their occupation, demanding changes to the curriculum, an end to the outsourcing of university workers, the end of financial barriers to education and, of course, a change in the name of the university. Calling themselves the Black Students

Movement, this multiracial campaign's primary demands can be encapsulated in its two most iconic slogans: Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall. The relationship between imperialism and capitalism is vividly portrayed through South Africa's history, and in many ways, modern universities are a post-colonial microcosm of its legacies. Protests against reductions in per capita funding and increases in fees which exclude most black students, in addition to demands for a new curriculum, have been met with violent repression, where rubber bullets and stun grenades have accompanied mass arrests of student protesters (Manyathela 2016).

"A Proper Degree"

In 1788, The Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa was founded in Britain, to help map the areas of the continent which Britain knew relatively little about. This organisation was one of the precursors of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS, founded in 1830 as the Geographical Society of London), and the first readership in geography (at the University of Oxford) in 1887. It is within the discussions among RGS members that British geography developed debates around the ways in which the discipline is implicated in Empire. In 1893, Peter Kropotkin addressed a Teachers Guild conference in Oxford, asserting that geography "must teach us, from our earliest childhood, that we are all brethren, whatever our nationality" (Willinsky 1998: 144). Some earlier utterances, however, were less egalitarian. An 1852 letter to the president of the RGS reads:

"Geography lays open to the Government and to the Capitalist the hidden resources of the remote parts of this great Empire, and teaches the one how to govern at the least cost, and the other to apply profitably the surplus capital and labour of the Country which thru' the RGS may be made known sooner than thru' any other means" (ibid: 141).

Such ideas were uncontroversial in nineteenth-century Britain. Thirty-two years later came the Conference of Berlin (1884–85), in which the European powers carved up the African map among themselves. Britain accrued a larger portion than most, a bounty which swelled significantly following its 1899 invasion of what is now one of the inland regions of Eastern South Africa (Pakenham 1979).

Academia in Britain today often frames decolonization as something which, if it needs to happen, is required elsewhere. Unlike South Africa, or other settler colonies such as the United States, the geographical disjuncture between Britain and its colonies can often lead to a conceptual disjuncture between Britain and post-colonialism (Hall 1991). But while imperialism's afterlife isn't as viscerally present as it is in other post-colonial nations, as the historic centre of Empire it remains vital that British geography joins a global movement towards decolonization. This must begin with the most powerful false assumption of the post-colony – that Europe is, and has long been, the intellectual and moral leader of the world. While the victories of anti-racism and anti-imperialism mean that articulating such an assumption is instinctively frowned upon, it remains the conventional wisdom underscoring the citations, curricula, canons and recruitment patterns across geography's academic institutions. The past president's address by Audrey Kobayashi at AAG 2013 was titled

Dialecta Interrupta: The idea of 'race' in the discipline of geography. She provided a radical intervention into both the conference and the Association, offering: “the idea of race in geography represents a contested and unfinished discourse, in a dialectic that has had many interruptions”. Kobayashi urged geographers to reflect critically upon the history of the discipline, and how this history has situated the discipline today. Such critical self-reflection is wholly necessary for comparable geographical institutions here in Britain if we are to unlearn the Eurocentric assumptions of colonial thought.

The student movements in South Africa are one example of the interruptions that necessitate the decolonization of knowledge production. South African universities rely on African land and African workers, making their default relationship with black peoples one of extraction and exploitation. The demands being made in this struggle call for the intellectual and moral contributions of black people to be added to this land and labour, as the enabling components of the academy. While the resources of the Global South can appear geographically distant to geographers based in Britain, this nation’s imperial history means that our intellectual culture is not too distant from those being struggled against on campuses in Britain’s former colonies. Geography was (and remains) a vital component in shaping the imperial ambitions of nation states. But it is also well placed to highlight the links between spaces and places divided by physicality, yet interconnected through militarism, appropriation and ideology (Godlewska & Smith 1994). Geographers sit at a historical crossroads in academia, and there is no middle, benevolent way forward. We can either attempt to ignore, and implicitly reproduce, the imperial logics that have influenced the shape of British geography since its inception, or actively rethink and dismantle imperialism’s afterlife, by unlearning the unjust global hierarchies of knowledge production upon which much of the Empire’s legitimacy was based.

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