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Questioning the Epistemology of Decolonise: The Case of Geography

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This paper was prompted by the prominence of new arguments in favour of ‘decolonising geography’. This was taken by the 2017 Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IGB) annual conference as its theme, with many preparatory papers in *Area* and *Transactions* and sessions organised around this. In both, to ‘decolonise’ was presented as an imperative for geography as a field of study, and for all geographers within it, to address urgently (Daigle and Sundberg, 2017; Jazeel, 2017).

In the USA, the annual American Association of Geographers (AAG) conference in New Orleans of 2018 also featured a number of well attended sessions that took the same perspective. The number of journal articles published advocating decolonialism has also increased sharply in the last two years.

The spirit in which this paper is written is supportive of new debates in the academy, and supportive of the equality goals of decolonise. However it takes issue with important assumptions that, it is argued, will not advance the cause of marginalised or of geography as a discipline.

The paper is in three related parts, each written in the spirit of raising debate. First it considers the principal knowledge claim of decolonise: that a distinctly Western epistemology presents itself as a universal way of knowing, and that this is complicit in colonialism of the past and colonality of the present through its undermining of a pluriverse of ontologies and consequent diversity of epistemologies (Sundberg, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2007). The paper also illustrates further how this principle of decolonialism is articulated in some key geographical debates. It then highlights a number of contradictions in and questions with this epistemological claim.

Second, decolonialism’s critique of universalist epistemology is effectively, and often explicitly, a critique of the Enlightenment, as Enlightenment humanism established knowledge as a product of universal rationality rather than varied cultures or deities (Pagden, 2015; Malik, 2014). The paper argues that decolonialism marks a retreat from what was positive about the Enlightenment tradition: the capacity of (geographical) knowledge to transcend time and place, and hence act as universal knowledge.

In conclusion I briefly broach the value of decolonising geography in terms of its claim to be challenging injustice. I suggest that a truly humanist and universalist approach to knowledge has more to offer geographers seeking ways to tackle inequality and differential access to the process of producing knowledge than has the epistemic relativism of decolonize.

### **The Epistemological Claim of Decolonise**

One of the claims made prominently at the conference and elsewhere by advocates of decolonisation is that geographical knowledge can be ‘Western’ (Radcliffe, 2017), ‘Eurocentric’ (Jazeel, 2017) ‘colonial’ (Baldwin, 2017; Noxolo, 2017) or ‘imperial’ (Tolia-Kelly, 2017; Connell, 2007 & 2017). This is not just a question of a close link between

geographical knowledge and Western interests *per se* - it is well established that geographical understanding has developed through and been utilised for partial, often brutal, interests. For example, one of the principal figures in the history of UK geography, Halford Mackinder, regarded geography as central to Britain's colonial mission (Livingstone, 1992).

At issue here is an epistemological one: Do the ideas, theories and techniques that today's geographers have inherited constitute a universal geographical tradition of human knowledge to be passed on, built upon and critiqued, or; are the ideas, theories and techniques themselves 'saturated in colonialism' (Radcliffe, 2017: 329) and hence part of a particular system of knowledge in urgent need of decolonisation.

In his advocacy of decolonialism, Grosfoguel (2007: 212) argues that it is wrong to say that 'there is one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve truth and universality'. Rather, he and other decolonial theorists argue for a pluriverse – a variety of ways of knowing corresponding to different historical experience and culture (Sundberg, 2014; Mignolo, 2013).

Decolonialism holds that systems of knowledge existing in colonised societies were effectively undermined by the false universal claims of the West, claims that were in turn inextricably bound up with colonialism itself. Hence in this formulation the persistence of the 'sole epistemic tradition' of 'the West' well after formal decolonisation has taken place ensures the continuation of a discriminatory culture of 'coloniality' (Grosfoguel, *ibid.*).

As a result it is not deemed sufficient to oppose colonialism or its legacy within the parameters of contemporary (geographical) thought, as that thought is itself the product of a Western epistemology complicit in colonialism and the denial of other ways of knowing. Jazeel quotes Audre Lorde to accentuate this: 'the masters tools will never demolish the masters house' (2017: 335).

This leads decolonial theory to argue that there needs to be a delinking from Western colonial epistemology (Mignolo, 2007). Here they part company with many post-colonial, liberal and Left arguments against colonialism and racism and for national independence and equal rights. These latter perspectives are viewed as unable to demolish the 'masters house', as they are using the 'master's tools'.

For Grosfoguel, rights – the basis around which almost all liberation struggles have been fought for the last 250 years – are '... articulated to the simultaneous production and reproduction of an international division of labour of core / periphery that overlaps with the global racial / ethnic hierarchy of Europeans / non-Europeans' (2007: 214). Rights discourse, as with 'Western' knowledge, is regarded as part of a Cartesian 'Western global design' (*ibid.*).

The relationship to the Enlightenment, then, is key. Enlightenment ideas are associated with modernity: the mastery of nature by people, as well as notions of rights and the social contract that influenced the development of the modern state. But for decolonial thinkers,

modernity itself is inextricably tied to colonialism (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2007). Hence the challenge for decolonisation is to oppose not just colonialism and inequality, but also the Enlightenment universalism that shapes academic disciplines and fields including geography (ibid.).

Decolonial theory proposes in its stead the pluriverse of *ways of knowing* (Sundberg, 2014). For example (Blaser, 2012: 7) writes of a 'pluriverse with multiple and *distinct ontologies* or *worlds*' that 'bring themselves into being and sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere and mingle with each other' under asymmetrical circumstances (my italics). Effectively this answers philosopher Ernest Gellner's rhetorical question: 'Is there but one world or are there many?' (Gellner, 1987: 83) with the clear answer 'many'.

It is important at this point to distinguish between a plurality of ideas, influences and cultures, as opposed to a pluriverse of ontologies; different worlds. The former is uncontentious – openness to ideas from other societies has to be progressive, and this is evident throughout history, if not self evident.

Cities and ports have played an important role in the mixing of cultures and ideas, and often have proved to be the drivers of scientific and social advance. Scientists have learned much from traditional practices, and have been able to systematise and apply that knowledge in other contexts. Equally, reviewing curricula to consider the case for the inclusion of different concepts, theories and techniques is a worthwhile exercise.

A pluriverse of ways of knowing has much greater implications, as it posits diverse *systems of knowledge* as opposed to a diversity of viewpoints *per se*.

### **The Debate in Geography**

The RGS-IGB 2017 Annual Conference call for sessions set out the aim of decolonising geographical knowledges as being to 'to query implicitly universal claims to knowledges associated with the west, and further interrogate how such knowledges continue to marginalise and discount places, people, knowledges across the world' (RGS-IGB, 2017).

Recent papers advocating decolonise argue in similar vein. Radcliffe argues that: 'Decolonial writers argue that the modern episteme is always and intrinsically saturated with coloniality' (2017: 329), hence the need to be alert to 'multiple, diverse epistemic and ethical projects' and to 'delink' from 'Euro-American frameworks' (ibid. 330). She goes on to argue that decoloniality should cover all aspects of geographical education: 'racism and colonial modern epistemic privileging are often found in students selection and progress; course design, curriculum content; pedagogies; staff recruitment; resource allocation; and research priorities and debates' (ibid. 331).

This challenge to the development of knowledge as a universal human endeavour, across history and culture, is often regarded not only as an issue for geographers, but is posed as a moral and political imperative (Elliot-Cooper, 2017; Jazeel, 2017). For Elliott-Cooper:

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 on which much of the Empires legitimacy was based. (2017:334)

To see contemporary geography as an expression of 'imperialism's afterlife' serves to dramatically reinforce a sense of geographical knowledge – knowledge *itself*, not its origin or application – as 'colonial' or 'imperial'. This approach often involves eschewing one's own, or 'Western', knowledge in favour of that of marginalised people. Two academics, reflecting on their teaching, state: 'Our efforts do not even begin to live up to decolonial land based pedagogies being implemented across indigenous communities' (Daigle and Sundberg, 2017: 339).

This deference to 'land based pedagogies', speaks to an eschewal modern geographical knowledge and method in favour of a plurality of knowledges, but with authority granted on the basis of indigeneity. Noxolo makes a similar case, arguing that '[t]here are material conditions of experience out of which both postcolonial and, crucially decolonial, writings emerge' (2017: 342). Emphasis is placed on intellectual authority of the lived experience of the marginalised.

We may well want to read something due to the experience of the writer, or to consider how a society gathers information, precisely in order to begin to understand perspectives and conditions of others who's lives may be very different to our own. But these writings enter into a world of ideas, theories and techniques in which individual geographers can judge their usefulness, veracity and explanatory power. The extent to which they are judged favourably as knowledge may well depend upon how far they *transcend* the conditions in which they were produced rather than their capacity to represent varied experience.

This is not at all to denigrate accounts based more directly upon lived experience and the diverse techniques and ideas that arise out of that, but simply to recognise the importance of generalisation, systematisation and abstraction in the production of knowledge that can have a universal veracity and capacity to help people in any context to understand and act upon the world we collectively inhabit.

### **Contradictions: Geography's History and Darwin**

There is a strong case against the epistemic relativism of decolonialism. Geographical thought is premised upon no more and no less that the impulse to understand the world around us in order to act upon it, whether we seek to conserve, harness or transform. Geographical knowledge *qua* knowledge is not tied to place, person or context in the way decolonise assumes – it is better understood not as the product of a pluriverse of ways of knowing the world, but a diverse universe of experience.

From ancient Greece onwards, and indeed prior to that, human societies have developed the capacity to act upon the world in pursuit of their ends, and to reflect upon their role in doing that. Geography – ‘earth writing’ – a term first used in 3,000 BC by scholars in Alexandria, is part of that humanistic tradition. From Herodotus mapping the Nile and considering its flow in 450 BC, up to today’s sophisticated Geographical Information Systems, knowledge confers the capacity to act.

How elites act is shaped by their societies and what they considered to be their political and economic goals. But the knowledge and techniques developed provide the basis for subsequent developments in knowledge, often in quite different societies. Knowledge and technique cross boundaries – the greater the capacity to travel and trade, the greater too the exchange of ideas on map making, agriculture, navigation and much else.

The 15th century explorer Prince Henry the Navigator acted in the interests of the Portuguese crown and instigated the slave trade, but was also a midwife to modern science. He was intrigued by the myth of Prester John, yet he also helped to see off the myths of sea monsters. His discoveries fueled a questioning of the notion that knowledge came from the external authority of a god, and a growing scientific spirit began to decentre mysticism and religion, a process that was later consolidated in the Enlightenment (Livingstone, 1992). Geographical knowledge – including that you were not going to sail off the end of the world, and that sea monsters are not real – stands as knowledge useful for any society or any individual, irrespective of Portugal’s leading role in the slave trade at this time.

So whilst of course it is important to consider and study the people, the society and interests involved in the production of knowledge, is also important to see knowledge’s universal potential. This is something downplayed by the calls to decolonise – knowledge and even technique seem at times to be tainted by the times in which they were developed and by the individuals who did the developing.

Deciding what is the best of this, always a worthy pursuit, may involve re-evaluating contributions from a variety of sources. Involvement in these sources, in the production of knowledge, may be shaped by national or racial oppression, poverty and access to resources, but it has little to do with *epistemic* oppression (Fricker, 1999).

Take for example, Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1998, original 1859). Darwin’s research involved all of the features regarded as ‘imperial’ by Connell (2007) and by other advocates of decolonialism: an association with the military (*The Beagle* was a military ship) and the use of others’ societies for data gathering without their consent or involvement. The voyage was funded by the British state who were engaged in colonial domination. Geography and scientific voyages were closely linked with imperial ambition (Livingstone, 1992).

Yet Darwin’s theory marked a major breakthrough in the understanding of evolution *regardless of this context*. As an explorer sponsored by the British imperialist state, and having benefitted from a good education, Darwin as an individual was clearly better placed to make

this breakthrough that native inhabitants of Britain's colonies or the Galapagos Islands – he had 'privilege' and he was 'white', two terms often used by decolonial activists to qualify or deny the authority of truth claims. Yet the *Origin of the Species* stands regardless of context as a ground breaking step forward in human understanding.

Darwinism has another link to colonialism. Social Darwinism was to provide the pseudo-scientific justification for the racism that in turn legitimised the imperialist Scramble for Africa and attendant racial extermination (Malik, 1997). Yet the veracity of Darwin's theory is not diminished by the horrors justified through its bastardisation as Social Darwinism. Contrary to the view key to decolonialism, geographical knowledge can be sound and an advance on previous thinking regardless of the uses and misuses to which it is put. That is in no way to legitimise those uses, but simply to recognise that ideas that have a universal veracity emerge from particular, contradictory and often (especially from the perspective of today) reactionary contexts.

Geographical knowledge can be (mis)understood and (mis)used to further particular politics. Darwin's ideas received a cool reception amongst those in the American South who believed that God had created wholly separate races with a differential capacity for intellect and reason. In New Zealand the same ideas were welcomed as a basis for an assumed superior group of colonisers taking over from an assumed less evolved, inferior group. This was in the context of struggle between Mauri and land hungry colonialists.

For Marx, Darwinism provided a metaphor for class struggle. For economic liberals social Darwinism buttressed the notion of *laissez-faire* free trade. Anarchist geographer Kropotkin advocated small scale cooperative societies – survival of those who cooperate, as they are best fitted for survival (Livingstone, 1992). So as well as being produced in contexts of power and inequality, knowledge is also mobilised in such contexts.

However Darwin's theory as the highest expression of human understanding of its time in its field stands regardless of these interpretations and mobilisations, to be accepted or criticised according to reason and scientific evidence alone. Geographical and scientific theory clearly does have the potential to constitute universal knowledge, and its capacity to do so is not limited by the context within which it emerged, or the interests of those who developed it. We cannot decolonise knowledge that is not, itself, colonial.

### **Decolonialism's Critique of Enlightenment Universalism**

It is clear that the epistemology of decolonialism is based, often explicitly, upon a critique of the Enlightenment and its orientation towards knowledge and truth. Emejulu states this clearly in a piece titled *Another University is Possible* (2017). She accepts that the Enlightenment viewed all men as endowed with rationality and logic, and with inalienable rights, that human authority was replacing the church – all the positive, humanist claims that defenders of the Enlightenment would cite.

However, she questions who is included in 'Man' - who counts as human in Enlightenment humanism? How universal is Enlightenment universalism? Who can be part of European modernity? She argues that the restriction of the category of those who are to be free was intrinsic to Enlightenment thought – i.e. it was a Western Enlightenment, not only geographically, but in essence. Knowledge, ideas themselves, can be 'Eurocentric,' 'Western' or even (increasingly) 'white' in the eyes of advocates of decoloniality.

Emejulu quotes Mills from his book *The Racial Contract* (1999):

The contemporary interpretation of the Enlightenment obscures its exclusion of women, 'savages', slaves and indigenous peoples through the prevailing racial science as inherently irrational beings. Savages – or the colonial other: the Native or Aboriginal peoples, the African, the Indian, the slave – were constructed as subhuman, incapable of logical reasoning and thus not subject to the equality or liberty enjoyed by 'men'. It is here, in the hierarchies of modernity that we can understand the central role of racism in shaping the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is brought into being by Europe's colonial entanglements and is wholly dependent on its particular patriarchal relations – which Europe, in turn, imposed on its colonial subjects.

So these authors argue that the Enlightenment did not establish, nor establish the potential for, universal freedoms and rights or knowledge either, but that it stemmed from particular interests and experiences, and played the role of enforcing the domination of those interests. Humanistic notions of the pursuit of knowledge are considered partial, as a false universalist flag raised in the service of Western colonialism.

Matthew Arnold's 19th century liberal humanist vision of knowledge (in schools) referring to 'the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits' (Arnold, 1869: viii) is rejected in favour of a view of knowledge itself as relative to incommensurate diverse human experience. This perspectival view of knowledge is central to the advocacy of decolonialism.

Sundberg (2014: 38), citing Blaser (2009), claims that the concept of the universal is itself 'inherently colonial', and can only exist through 'performances' that 'tend to suppress and / or contain the enactment of other possible worlds'. This is a striking rejection of universality. Whilst logically universal claims *can* undermine different ways to think about the world, assuming that this is *inherent* in universal thinking questions geographical thought from any source that aspires to transcend diverse experience and be judged as part of a global geographical conversation across time and space.

Whilst this point is made by Sundberg to deny the wider veracity of Western thinking, logically it would apply to others too – it suggests Southern scholars, too, should not aspire to speak too far outside of their assumed ontological and epistemological identities in search of universal truths.



## In Defence of the Enlightenment Legacy

The view as set out by Emejulu (2017) and implicit or explicit through much of literature is both one sided and also a misreading of the Enlightenment. Many Enlightenment thinkers articulated ideas that were new and revolutionary in that they posited two things: the centrality of humanity in making the world in which we live (through reason and through scientific understanding replacing religious and mystical views of one's place and possibilities), and; the possibility and moral desirability of universal freedoms from subjection by others – natural, universal rights applicable to all. Both the study of the world, and the idea that people within the world were equal and free, were central to the Enlightenment (Pagden, 2015; Malik, 2014).

However, these ideas emerged within and through a world of interests, prejudices and limitations. So there is a dialectical relationship: the new ideas that point to the possibility and desirability of human equality and freedom, and the world as it was which, as Emejulu rightly says, was far from free or equal and far from becoming so.

Consider the *American Declaration of Independence* of 1776 - a document shaped by the new ideas of the Enlightenment, and associated with freedom and rights subsequently. Some of its signatories and drafters, including Thomas Jefferson, were slaveholders or had a stake in the slave trade. Yet the *Declaration* served as an emblem for opponents of slavery and inequality for the next 200 years.

The most famous clause in the *Declaration* states: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' (US Congress, 1776). At the time principled abolitionists played on the contradiction between the grand ideas and the practice of men like Jefferson. Some even argued that the clause relating to the 'right of revolution' (which was there to justify fighting for independence from the British) could apply to slaves who were not being treated equally.

Martin Luther King referenced the *Declaration* in his famous 'I Have A Dream' speech at the Washington for Jobs and Freedom Demonstration of August 28, 1963: 'When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' (King, 1991: 217). King's speech, holding society to account by its own highest, universal moral standards, was in a long and noble tradition.

In the same vein the French Revolution's *Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1791) also states: 'All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.' The dialectical tension between by the ideas that informed the French Revolution and the reality of the society is well illustrated by CLR James in *The Black Jacobins* (2001, original 1938). James writes of the Haitian revolution, a revolution in revolutionary

France's colony, in which slaves and their leaders took the ideas of the revolutionaries at their word. They directly confronted the limits of the revolution by insisting that its demand for liberty, fraternity and equality be made truly universal and applied to themselves, the slaves in the colonies.

The force of these Enlightenment influenced universalist conceptions of humanity, central to both *Declarations*, feature throughout the history of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. For example, Ho Chi Minh's *Vietnamese Declaration of Independence* in 1945 cites both the famous 'all men are created equal' clause from the *American Declaration*, and its equivalent in the *French Declaration*, to accuse both of these imperialist countries of denying these 'undeniable truths' (Ho Chi Minh, 1945). In the Vietnamese *Declaration* it was assumed that the denial of Enlightenment ideals, not their assertion, characterised colonialism and imperialism. This is reversed in decolonial theory.

Equally, colonialism involved the denial of the fruits of modern geographical knowledge and technique, not an imposition of 'colonial' ideas. Just as geographic technique and knowledge developed in the imperialist West no doubt played a dark role in the war in Vietnam - not least cartography in charting bombing missions - so those same tools (or more advanced versions) in mapping, agriculture and much else are utilised today to enable a sovereign Vietnam look to a better future.

Enlightenment ideas, expressed in the *American Declaration of Independence* and France's *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, were drafted by people complicit in slavery and formed a rational and moral basis for equality. The former does not contradict the latter. In similar vein geographical knowledge was harnessed to oppress, and provided the basis for post-colonial governments to progress. The *Declarations* were both of their time and transcendent of their time, as is good geographical knowledge. It is in the latter sense that we judge their worth as knowledge to help us understand and act upon the world today.

There is much else to be said about the Enlightenment of course. There were great diversity and contradictions within it. What Enlightenment scholar Jonathan Israel (2009) terms the Radical Enlightenment consisted of thinkers who pushed at the contradiction between the potential in Enlightenment thought and some of the backward beliefs prevalent amongst their contemporaries. They went well beyond the limiting assumption of humanity characteristic of their time: that some were capable of citizenship rights, and others were not.

Thomas Paine argued against slavery on the grounds that it infringed the universal (natural) right to human freedom. He did not restrict his category of 'Man' to western Man. He criticised colonialism too. He argued that Africans were productive, peaceful citizens in their own countries, until the English enslaved them (Paine, 1774). Diderot, Raynal, d'Holbach and others contributed to a 1770 volume titled *Histoire Philosophique des Deux Indes* (The Philosophical History of the Two Indies). The book asserts that 'natural liberty is the right which nature has given to everyone to dispose of himself according to his will'. It prophesied and defended the revolutionary overthrow of slavery: 'The negroes only want a chief,

sufficiently courageous to lead them to vengeance and slaughter... Where is the new Spartacus?’ (cited in Malik, 2017).

So Emejulu’s account, and the assumption of decolonialism, are wrong. The issue is not that the Enlightenment is racist and partial, and the intellectual traditions that draw upon its legacy comprise ‘imperial’ or ‘colonial’ knowledge. Rather, the Enlightenment put reason and rationality, scientific method and the potential for liberty and equality at the centre of intellectual and political life. It provided a basis for common, human pursuit of knowledge.

The growth of scientific method associated with the Enlightenment, as an orientation towards knowledge, was not linked to any particular culture or deity, but to universal reason (Malik, 2014). The implication of this is that theories should be judged for their capacity to explain and predict, concepts for their capacity to illuminate and techniques for their efficacy. That they should be judged with consideration for (or even deference towards) the identity, political or social, of their originator, or with regard to context or contemporary use – all key to decolonialism – undermines the pursuit of truth as a universal, human project.

Knowledge, theories and techniques are better seen as having the capacity to transcend place and power. The veracity of a theory, the usefulness of a concept or the efficacy of a technique are remarkably unaffected by their origin and their context. Audre Lorde’s idiom, ‘The masters tools will never dismantle the master’s house’, invoked by Jazeel (2017: 335) to argue that the traditions of knowledge and rights associated with the West cannot be the basis for the liberation of the non-West, is simply untrue in this context. The anti-colonial and anti-racist movements of the past achieved a massive amount through struggles that explicitly drew upon iconic assertions of the ‘Western’ Enlightenment. There is clearly some way to go.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Decolonialism and Liberation**

To decolonise has been presented as a moral imperative connected to liberation (Jazeel, 2017; Elliot-Cooper, 2017). I think it is better regarded as one approach, premised upon particular political views and assumptions such as critical race theory and the intersectional politics of identity. In its advocacy of an ontological pluriverse and of diverse systems of knowledge, there is one knowledge claim that cannot be allowed – the claim that knowledge, from any source, ultimately, can aspire to be universal. In addition, presenting decolonialism as a moral and political imperative leaves little room for alternatives which become, *a priori*, immoral.

By contrast, Brenda Wingfield, Vice President of the Academy of Science of South Africa, argues that: ‘What’s really important is that South African teachers, lecturers and professors must develop curricula that build on *the best knowledge skills, values, beliefs and habits from around the world*’ (2017) (my italics). She fears that the rhetoric of decolonialism will effectively delink South Africa from science’s cutting edge. She points out that this in turn reduces the opportunity for young black South African scholars to be involved with the most advanced knowledge *whatever its source*, and also the opportunity to adapt and utilise that knowledge to

address local issues and conditions. In other words, decolonialism could damage the potential for material liberation from poverty, and for promoting a more equal involvement in the global production of knowledge about our shared world.

In the spirit of the Radical Enlightenment, I would argue that the best of geographical knowledge and technique be made available for the benefit of all, on the terms of the beneficiaries. In judging 'the best', origin and context, whilst important and enlightening areas of study in themselves, are secondary.

Academics and universities could certainly more effectively challenge the marginalisation of parts of the world in academic life and the production of geographical knowledge. Suggestions would include: Truly reciprocal academic exchanges, funded by Western universities who can better afford it, where budding academics from the South can choose freely from the curriculum around their own priorities; greater joint projects to understand and find solutions to problems as they are defined by Southern governments; increased funding for twinning with under resourced universities in the South, with a "no strings attached" undertaking to share knowledge, training and resources as they are demanded from academics based in the South.

In other words, we should prioritise a relationship between *knowledge and resources* from the best universities in the world (wherever they are located), and the *sovereignty* of the South. None of this necessitates the decolonisation of geographical knowledge. Rather, it requires us to think afresh at how the promissory note of the Enlightenment – the ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality (and I would add of the potential to understand the word in order to change it) – can be cashed.

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