

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

Decolonizing Education: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Challenges

Silvester Trnovec. *The Conquest of the African Mind. History, Colonial Racism, and Education in Senegal and French West Africa, 1910–1945.* Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2019. 102 pp. Paper. ISBN: 9788089607839.

Peter Kallaway. *The Changing Face of Colonial Education in Africa. Education, Science and Development.* Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2020. 262 pp. List of Tables. Appendices. Abbreviations. References. Index. \$48.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1032173580.

Oluwaseun Tella and Shireen Motala, eds. *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers. Transforming Humanities Curricula in South Africa, Africa, and African-American Studies.* Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2020. 426 pp. Acronyms and abbreviations. Notes. References. \$20.66. Paper. ASIN: B08GY1T5YF.

Grace Khunou, Hugo Canham, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Edith Dinong Phaswana, eds. *Black Academic Voices. The South African Experience.* Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2019. 226 pp. \$42.56. Paper. ISBN: 978-0796924599.

Linda Cooper, Sheri Hamilton, eds. *Renewing Workers' Education: A Radical Vision.* Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2020. 244 pp. Paper. ISBN: 978-0796925817.

Concepts such as “decolonize,” “decolonial,” and “decolonization” have gained wide currency in the political, academic, and media debates that have been taking place in Western societies in recent times. In 2020, the death of George Floyd rekindled the fight against systemic racism in the United States and prompted large collective mobilizations on an international scale. The legacies of the colonial and slavery past, as well as their visibility in the public space (statues, street and square names, etc.), have been increasingly

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denounced in many countries, from South Africa through the United Kingdom to Germany, Brazil, and Switzerland. Places where knowledge is produced and disseminated, such as museums, libraries, and universities, have also embarked on their own critical reflections. Faced with the colonial origins of collections and academic disciplines, as well as the controversies around the restitution of property looted from African and Asian countries since the nineteenth century, many institutions have put in place measures to diversify their curricula and staff, promote more equitable access to knowledge, and carry out acts of “justice of memory.” Activist groups, on the other hand, have developed more radical analyses and called for the “colonial” structures that underpin Western societies and their relationship to the world to be challenged.

Based on these examples, the notion of “decolonization,” in the broadest sense of the term, may have several meanings. On the one hand, it refers to a critical intellectual approach which aims to deconstruct the power relations and representations shaped by the historical experience of colonialism on economic, social, and cultural levels. On the other hand, it refers to prescriptive action aimed at producing a new type of knowledge which seeks to be less Eurocentric and able to support anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist struggles. In both cases, education is a major battleground. Indeed, education historically played a central role in colonialism’s “civilizing mission” in Africa and Asia. The school served as a means of consolidating colonial rule and constructing a collective imaginary which organized populations into a hierarchy based on their race. Subsequently, the postcolonial and decolonial literature that developed in the 1980s and 1990s strongly questioned the role of universities—and, more generally, of academic research—in the (re)production of knowledge and of representations of the world modeled on Western schemas, including in the countries of the South.

The five books reviewed in this essay help put this fascinating debate into perspective. Published between 2019 and 2020, they shed light on the realities of colonial education in twentieth-century Africa, the reconfigurations that occurred during the wave of independence, as well as the current struggles around decolonization, Africanization, and the indigenization of knowledge (on these concepts, see also Pratt et al. 2018). With the exception of Silvester Trnovec’s book, all of these publications examine the subject using the example of South Africa. This country is an interesting case study for two reasons. First, a racially segregated education system was established with the Bantu Education Act of 1953, which for a long time deprived the black population of educational opportunities worthy of the name. Second, the end of the apartheid regime and the coming to power of the African National Congress in 1994 raised hopes that were quickly dashed. Thus, the student protests of 2015–2016, which unfolded under the hashtags #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, denounced the deep racial, economic, social, gender, and educational inequalities that run through South African society.¹ They also called into question the teaching content and the ways in which knowledge is produced in universities,

where whites are over-represented and disciplines are imbued with an epistemology inherited from the colonial past which, according to the most critical views, does not correspond to local and indigenous realities (see, among many interesting studies, Chisholm et al. 2018; Sayed et al. 2017).

Giving an account of these debates, along with the very militant stances that come with them, is not an easy task. As a white cisgender historian working in an academic institution at the heart of Europe, I am indeed aware that “subjectivity, situatedness, and positionality matter” (Kessi et al. 2020:274). I should therefore like to make it clear from the outset that this review essay, written at the invitation of the *African Studies Review*, offers a very personal analysis of these works, which is informed by my individual and academic journey. In any case, I am convinced that the notion of decolonization has great heuristic potential for historical research in education. At the same time, as a historian, I also believe it is important that theoretical reflections should be anchored to specific empirical and archival terrains. From this point of view, the publications reviewed in this essay allow us to address three particularly interesting questions. The first is the study of the realities of colonial education, whose ambiguities, limitations, and many paradoxes have been highlighted by recent research. The second concerns the Africanization of knowledge production, which is not a recent phenomenon but a multisituated and heterogeneous historical process. Finally, the third question concerns the political and militant dimension of the debates on the decolonization of education and the practical alternatives put forward by its supporters.

With regard to the decolonization of education, the first point that needs to be discussed concerns the nature, meaning, and roles of education in a colonial context. These issues are explored in depth in *The Conquest of the African Mind* by Silvester Trnovec. This monograph, which draws on PhD research, traces the history of education in French West Africa between 1900 and 1940, focusing on the case of Senegal. Its aim is to show the link between the particular type of education provided to the African population in primary schools, and the construction, even inculcation, of a racial inferiority that was supposed to justify colonial rule. To this end, the book focuses on the example of history instruction. Trnovec shows how this discipline was used to “transmit the discourse of French nationalism and imperialism to African pupils in order to shape their identification with the French colonial state” (6). Several passages in the book clearly illustrate the way in which school textbooks served as a means of glorifying France’s “civilizing mission,” erasing Africa’s precolonial past or portraying it in a negative light. Through this process, Trnovec argues, the colonizers succeeded in “naturalizing” their supposed racial superiority and shaping the “African mind.” An analysis of the work of African schoolchildren, some of whom took up the official discourse promoted by the school institution, is intended to attest to this assimilation of foreign values, standards, and epistemologies.

Trnovec's work thus helps us to understand the historical genesis of the modalities of transmitting and learning knowledge shaped by a relationship of colonial domination, a relationship that continued despite the wave of independence in the early 1960s. This thesis is undoubtedly interesting and well demonstrated by the author. It has, however, the disadvantage of showing only one side of colonial education. Indeed, recent historiography has strongly stressed the many ambiguities of the colonial educational project, which affected its coherence, scope, and effectiveness. Education did not always seek cultural assimilation and, contrary to certain received ideas, schoolchildren did not systematically learn about "our ancestors the Gauls." Moreover, as historians Céline Labrune-Badiane and Étienne Smith (2018) have shown, West African schoolteachers played a significant role in the production of knowledge, even in a discipline such as history. Placing an emphasis on local actors' capacity for agency—which is mentioned but relatively neglected by Silvester Trnovec—makes it possible to draw a more complex picture of the realities of colonial education. This is not to underestimate the role that education played in colonial oppression and the "depersonalization" of African identity (Sar et al. 1956:78), but rather to bring to light the internal contradictions and relative fragility of the colonial hegemonic project.

The ambivalences of colonial education are clearly revealed by Peter Kallaway's *The Changing Face of Colonial Education*. This book, which is the result of fifteen years of research, brings together a selection of seven articles which were originally published in internationally renowned journals. Drawing on meticulous archival research, Kallaway takes the reader into the heart of the debates that attended the development of educational policies in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the British colonies. As the author points out, the main purpose of the book is to "move beyond clichés about colonial education to an understanding of the complexities of how educational policy was developed in different places at different times while giving credence to arguments which see schooling as a form of social control in the colonial environment" (i). Kallaway first of all shows the great variety of actors involved in these processes by looking at the role of missionaries, reformers linked to the New Education movement, anthropologists, linguists, and colonial officials. He also convincingly illuminates the transnational circulation of ideas and knowledge pertaining to these debates. Particular attention is paid to the humanitarian and developmentalist considerations which shaped the meaning and content of colonial education from the 1930s onward. Indeed, in an international context undergoing profound changes, education became an instrument for (re)legitimizing colonialism, being increasingly linked to the colonial development policies put in place under the Welfare and Development Acts of 1940 and 1945. Some of the most interesting chapters are those devoted to two South African educators, Donald M'Timkulu and Samuel Mqhayi. As with the West African schoolteachers mentioned above, these

figures played a significant role in shaping educational debates, even though they occupied subordinate positions and were subject to asymmetric power relations.

Finally, the works of Silvester Trnovec and especially Peter Kallaway demonstrate the need to go beyond a simplistic reading of colonial education. Indeed, it is important to take into account its ambiguities and limitations, as well as the gap between discourse and practice. It is also essential to restore the agency of African actors, who were not passive receivers but also producers of knowledge.

The second issue raised by the publications reviewed in this essay concerns the role education played in the decolonization process. As stated above, it is important here to be aware of the paradoxes of colonial education. On the one hand, it was a powerful instrument of social control and racial segregation, as with the Bantu system in South Africa. On the other hand, many African independence leaders were trained in colonial schools, which unintentionally offered the conditions for contesting and undermining European rule. What is certain is that extended access to knowledge was quickly identified by anticolonial movements as a tool of emancipation and liberation, as well as an important condition of the social and economic development of Africa. In the early 1960s, the need to Africanize educational structures and content also came to the fore. For example, in May 1961, at a conference of the education ministers of the newly independent countries organized by UNESCO in Addis Ababa, the Burkinabe intellectual Joseph Ki-Zerbo stressed that “education must be African, that is to say, it must be founded on the basis of specific African culture” (1961:59). According to him, this requirement entailed rethinking the teaching of subjects such as philosophy, geography, history, arts, and languages on a pan-African basis.

The question of decolonizing education, which is so relevant today, therefore has a historical depth that goes back to the anticolonialist struggles and the work done by many Black intellectuals from the early days of independence (and even before). It should be noted, however, that this quest for Africanization came up against many obstacles. It is therefore not surprising that one of the issues at the heart of the present-day postcolonial and decolonial reappraisal is reassessing the “coloniality” of academic knowledge and disciplines which, it is claimed, are still rooted in the institutional and intellectual frameworks inherited from the colonial era examined by Silvester Trnovec and Peter Kallaway.

Thinking about this epistemological rupture and putting forward new alternatives is the aim of the third book discussed in this essay, *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers*. The starting point of its editors, Oluwaseun Tella and Shireen Motala, is the following observation: “Despite two-and-a-half decades of black majority rule, South African higher education continues to embrace European models and paradigms,” as well as to “reflect Eurocentric, colonial and apartheid designs” (1). *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers* seeks to propose ways to decolonize and democratize South African

universities. This book, which is organized into twenty-four chapters, begins with an analysis of the student movements that took place in 2015 at the universities of Witwatersrand, Rhodes, and Cape Town, followed by a number of theoretical reflections on the challenges of changing curricula, particularly in the cases of sociology and philosophy. Several contributions are then devoted to the experiences of decolonizing knowledge in Africa since the wave of independence, which are presented as reference models from which inspiration could be drawn. Thus, fascinating contributions trace the history of important African schools of thought in the social sciences and humanities, such as in Nigeria (Ibadan School of History), Tanzania (Dar es Salaam School of Political Economy), and Senegal (Dakar School of Culture). The concrete Africanization policies pursued in several countries between the 1950s and 1970s are also examined in detail, with a particular focus on Ghana (and the creation, for example, of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, in 1963) and Uganda (the History of Uganda Project launched at Makerere College in 1969). The analysis also extends outside Africa, with chapters devoted to the role of black universities in the United States and the contribution of African American studies to the production of alternative non-Eurocentric knowledge. Examples of such initiatives include the Atlanta School of Sociology, led by scholars such as Richard Wright and W.E.B. du Bois who, beginning with the 1890s, tried to debunk racist ideas, and the Howard School of International Affairs, where academics such as Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, and Eric Williams introduced the notions of empire and race into the study of international relations.

All these contributions offer very concrete, albeit heterogeneous, examples of the Africanization and decolonization of knowledge. What emerges from these historical experiences is particularly the importance of highlighting indigenous knowledge, which is all too often marginalized, of reconnecting with Africa's precolonial history, and of making better use of African languages and research methods such as oral surveys. In the end, therefore, the book helps define the contours of a "decolonial methodology" that can be used to rethink curricula and the production of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences.² This also involves subverting the ways in which academic research works (assessment, funding, subjects of investigation, etc.) and the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students (Jansen 2017).

Nevertheless, this "decolonial methodology" poses a series of problems, both practical and theoretical, which the book discusses at length. For example, should there be a move toward developing an autonomous African knowledge, or rather opt for a "fusion of epistemologies" (193) with Western knowledge? In the latter case, how can we conceive a possible coproduction of knowledge between African and Western researchers and embark on a collective decolonization of academic disciplines? Finally, how should we deal with the danger of the post- or decolonial cause being politically hijacked by a neoliberal academic system which seeks to depoliticize these struggles?

All these questions provide food for thought on the contemporary issues raised by the decolonization of education, in Africa as well as in other contexts.

The third and last point discussed in this essay concerns the highly political and militant dimension which characterizes this debate and is sometimes subject to fierce criticism. To speak of decolonization is indeed to speak of individual and collective resistances, as well as the creation of new spaces of possibility. The positionality of the actors who are involved is therefore central. The particularly committed tone of the reflections contained in *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers* is the result of the personal experiences and daily lives of its authors, namely, black scholars working in a still mainly white institutional space in a country of the South (for a broader reflection, see Martin et al. 2021).

The importance of taking this individual subjectivity into account is brilliantly conveyed in *Black Academic Voices*, edited by Grace Khunou, Hugo Canham, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Edith Dinong Phaswana. This book is a collection of twelve biographical accounts by black women and men who are active in the South African academic system. This self-reflective approach serves a very specific political purpose: to “create a history making process” (2) and “certify that a particular group of black academics existed in a world where academy, and its culture, is/was not made for blacks” (5). This book is thus an act of “epistemic disobedience” (4) which deliberately leaves ample room for the personal and the emotional. On the one hand, it brings to light the intellectual and institutional marginalization practices prevailing in a patriarchal and racially marked academia. This liberation of speech is interesting because it reveals the permanence of racial stereotypes that profoundly affect the academic experience of black people, as well as the exclusion mechanisms that the academic institution, sometimes unconsciously, implements. On the other hand, these stories are also examples of resilience and resistance, a powerful demonstration of “black agency” (7) and the will to self-assertion in a hostile world. Thus, while the book as a whole denounces the white culture of South African universities, it also offers a glimpse into its contributors’ margins for maneuvering and strategies for “navigating the system” (192), albeit at the cost of strong tensions with their own identities and personal pasts.

From this point of view, *Black Academic Voices* clearly shows the extent to which education can also be a means of individual and collective emancipation. This observation is shared by the fifth and final book reviewed in this essay, *Renewing Workers’ Education: A Radical Vision*. Edited by Linda Cooper and Sheri Hamilton, this volume offers an interesting analysis of workers’ education as a tool for the social advancement of the working classes. Like *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers* and *Black Academic Voices*, the editors denounce a failing post-apartheid South African state. They particularly point to the “continued dominance of capitalist social relations in South Africa” which, they claims, have prevailed thanks to the “realignment of ruling class forces to ensure that political and economic elites are

more ‘racially’ inclusive” and by extending “social welfare’s ‘safety net’ for the very poor” (xvi). Written by both researchers and practitioners, the contributions included propose several avenues for rethinking workers’ education: the challenge is to go beyond the utilitarian vision which sees education as a simple acquisition of knowledge aimed at improving human capital, and understand it as a tool that can help build “an alternative society that serves the interests of workers and the poor” (xv).

What is at stake here is not so much the transformation of traditional educational institutions as the revival of the vibrant tradition of the South African trade-union movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which promoted “specific educational forms created by workers themselves or by groups seeking to shape their knowledge, worldviews, and collective actions of workers” (xiv). Thus, contributors’ reflections are less concerned with the question of decolonization per se, focusing instead on the creation and empowerment of a class-based knowledge as an alternative to the capitalist social and economic model.

To conclude, the main interest of these five books lies in the decentering they make possible in relation to the history and present of (post)colonial education. Each in their own way, they examine the contexts of knowledge production as well as individual real-life experiences, while imagining alternatives inspired by African schools of thought and the experience of the workers’ movement. What is particularly interesting is that these reflections, largely coming from African academics, propose a vision of decolonizing education from the bottom up and as seen from the South. This helps shed new light on the debates taking place on the same subject in intellectual and activist circles in Western countries.

As a historian, I also think it is important to address the “coloniality” of knowledge and education through analyses that are based on thorough empirical research. These can add complexity to theoretical analyses that are sometimes abstract and offer an oversimplified view of historical reality. From this point of view, the importance of the publications reviewed here is that they show the ambiguities and internal contradictions of the colonial educational project, its metamorphoses in the postcolonial age, and the room for maneuver that local actors had—and may yet have—despite the difficulties they encountered.

No consensus definition of what decolonizing education means or how it should be put into practice emerges from these works. Certainly, there is a radical vision put forward by, for example, Joel Modiri who, in *From Ivory Towers to Ebony Towers*, defines this process as an “insatiable reparatory demand” and an “insurrectionary utterance” that must involve the “dissolution of the world of the conqueror and its epistemological and ontological frameworks” (172). In this case, decolonization is not a vague “metaphor” (Tuck & Yang 2012), since it involves a clean break with an intrinsically colonial Western world. But this transformation can also be achieved through collective reflection which would also involve researchers from the countries of the North. As many initiatives are now proposing, this would mean critically

appraising our disciplines—whether it be the history of education³ or comparative/international education (Takayama et al. 2017)—rethinking the teaching content, and better integrating the epistemologies of the South into the knowledge-production process.

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Notes

1. Original sources and documentation about student protests in South Africa are available here: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/student-protests-democratic-south-africa>.

2. In this regard, see the work of the “The Curriculum Change Working Group” established in 2016 at the University of Cape Town (<https://www.news.uct.ac.za/news/debates/ccwg/>). Another interesting experience is “The Black Academic Caucus” created in 2012 at the same university.
3. The 2021 meeting of the US-based *History of Education Society* was devoted to the following topic: “Decolonizing the History of Education” (<https://www.historyofeducation.org/annual-meeting/>).