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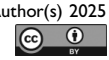
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‘Decolonization’ as neoliberal ideology: Anthropological theory and the political economy of the modern university

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Abstract

Current management-led proposals to ‘decolonize the university’ within elite Anglo-American institutions ideologically legitimate their restructuring as transnational businesses. While anthropology is uniquely placed to critique social institutions and ideologies, its current dominant theoretical orientation is blind to the forms of power which shape its own institutional environments. Even as anthropologists have engaged in theories said to address problems of representation and epistemic injustice, they have failed to analyze the multiple crises of contemporary higher education, resulting from the profound transformation of universities’ political economy under neoliberal capitalism. A genuinely decolonial anthropology is one which frankly analyses its own structural economic conditions and combines this with a political practice of national and transnational solidarities to transform the institution of the university at the local and global level.

Keywords

Decolonization, neoliberalism, postmodernism, higher education, anthropology

Introduction

In recent years there has been widespread discussion of ‘decolonization’ among intellectuals, political movements and governments in postcolonial societies, as well as activists in the former colonial metropoles of the Global North (Táíwò, 2022a). These uses of the term do not refer to the process of former colonies becoming independent and making

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themselves into self-governing entities but to the broader meaning of undoing colonialism by addressing its ongoing legacies. This has informed national politics in many countries, something I observed firsthand studying attempts to 'decolonize the state' in Bolivia (Doyle, 2024, 2025). However, this article specifically examines the way decolonization has been employed within elite Anglo-American academia as a means of reforming the theory and practice of scholarly disciplines and the university as an institution. Not only have calls to 'decolonize the university' been made by activist groups, but the language of decolonization was enthusiastically adopted by the management of higher education institutions, particularly among the most elite private and public bodies in the United States and the 'Russell Group' of self-appointed leading research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, fields across the humanities and social sciences, including anthropology, experienced 'decolonial turns' that interrogated the entanglement of academic disciplines with colonialism and proposed new 'decolonial' pedagogical, methodological and epistemological departures (Jobson, 2020; Thomas and Clarke, 2023).

This article therefore begins by considering anthropology's complex relationship with colonialism, including its role in directly combating imperialism and racism, alongside reflexive attempts to come to terms with epistemic injustices inherent to its practices. I argue that anthropology's strength lies in a critical realist perspective that informs its political praxis, which when fully realized provides the best possibility for genuinely decolonial scholarship. It then provides a historical analysis of the university to understand how its institutional form has been shaped by changes to capitalism's political economy over the last five hundred years, situating the ongoing transformations in Anglo-American institutions. These explain how a theoretical orientation that rejects 'grand theory' and analysis of structure became especially dominant within elite anthropology, but which cannot explain the processes of economic power shaping the conditions of its own knowledge nor account for the crises of the environments in which scholars operate.

Finally, it turns to the contemporary university, focusing on the United Kingdom and the United States. Efforts by students and staff to democratically reform and address the coloniality of higher education are not only incompatible with the underlying financial model of elite Anglo-American universities but in their 'strategic advancement' (Shain et al., 2021) serve to ideologically mask the conversion of higher learning into a transnational commodity, alongside the creation of a segmented and unequal global education system. The current conjuncture, in which the authoritarianism of university management as the servants of transnational capital has been laid bare, while the existence and autonomy of higher education is under attack by right-wing forces, urgently demands a re-evaluation of the purpose and character of critical scholarship.

Consequently, the discipline of anthropology, as part of efforts to 'decolonize the university' in the Global North, needs to engage in concrete political action, alongside theory that addresses the operation of power through political economy and social structure. While defending the university as a community of learning, it must be reformed from within as part of movements seeking broader change. I conclude by briefly providing examples of modest attempts some of us have engaged in which suggest that it is within transnational solidarities of resistance that the universities of the future will be built.

The colonial critique and anthropology since the 80s

Among the social sciences anthropology has long been especially sensitive to its entanglements with colonialism. Social and cultural anthropologists throughout much of the 20th century saw themselves as the allies of indigenous, poor and peasant peoples: either as advocates for indigenous rights and against dominant forms of racism, or more indirectly, through piercing the ethnocentrism of Eurocentric thought by centring the worldviews of peoples treated as marginal, irrational or backward (Stocking, 1968). At the same time, as an enterprise which studied non-European peoples dominated by European powers for a European audience, the knowledge it produced supported colonialism, both directly via providing information on native social life and political systems for colonial administrations, and indirectly, through reproducing representations and categories of thought that ultimately reflected the perspectives of European colonizers (Asad, 1975). Moreover, both British Social Anthropology and North American Cultural Anthropology, despite their ostensible differences, possessed a remarkable theoretical symmetry in conceiving of their object of study as a discrete, bounded entity (i.e. 'culture' or 'social structure') which could be objectively represented, catalogued and compared (Glick Schiller, 2009). This resulted in a mid-20th-century anthropology that conceived of itself as closer to the natural sciences, especially in establishing a shared 'research programme' (Lakatos, 1978) of core theoretical assumptions and questions (involving topics such as kinship 'systems', belief, ritual, non-state political organization and economic exchange), alongside a correspondingly problematic tendency to provide totalizing and essentializing analyses of culture and social life.

Moreover, the epistemological position implicit throughout much early modern anthropology, shared common assumptions with the philosophical tradition of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1989). This is a form of epistemic pluralism which views both scientific theories and emic worldviews as culturally and historically contingent perspectives that can nonetheless express partial truths about the social world and be critically compared (Bhaskar, 1989). While rarely acknowledged in these terms, this lay at the core of the discipline's popular appeal and its capacity to critique ethnocentrism via the comparative method. Moreover, such an orientation can be seen not only in the early work of figures such as Evans-Pritchard (1976) but in the Manchester School and later Marxist anthropology, which grounded analyses of institutions and power in the realities of life and fieldwork, while recognizing how these are enmeshed in broader global dynamics (Balandier, 2013; Wolf, 1990). This permitted anthropology to denaturalize ideology, or the operation of power through dominant ideas, and to offer an analysis and critique of colonialism, both in political/material terms and epistemically, through exposing the imposition of alien logics onto indigenous worldviews (Taussig, 1977).

However, in the late 20th century, Anglo-American anthropology underwent a series of reflexive self-critiques. These took place during a period marked by European decolonization and global socioeconomic change. The first strand of critique, which was heavily influenced by Marxian ideas, such as Dependency and World Systems Theory (Frank, 1966; Wallerstein, 1979), argued that by representing the world's indigenous peoples as isolated and atemporal societies 'outside of history', anthropology was complicit in

denying the realities of colonialism and misrepresenting how the contemporary world is an interconnected neo-colonial system that continues to perpetuate deep injustices (Wolf, 1982). Influenced by both neo-Marxist and Foucauldian theory, Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1975) described how anthropology and the very conceptual categories of modern social science were born of European imperialism and continue to underpin the systems of power and knowledge this engendered. These debates gave way to a more general 'crisis of ethnographic authority' that converged with South Asian Subaltern Studies (Guha, 1982) and the rise of what was labelled 'post-modern theory' in Europe and North America.

'Postmodernism' is a somewhat vague and maligned term, but in the context of the broad movement which took place in academia during the 1980s, it refers mainly to two overlapping trends. The first is poststructuralist social theory – notably the works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault – which emphasizes the diffuse and pervasive nature of power, according to which claims to truth and social reality are ultimately manifestations of its operation. The second refers to the theorization of a new 'postmodern condition', in which fixed identities and the authority of science and political ideologies have been undermined, reflecting the transformations of the late 20th century that witnessed the deindustrialization of European and North American societies, the rise of an interconnected globalized capitalist order and new forms of hybrid and unstable culture (Lyotard, 1979). While a 'postmodern turn' affected the social sciences throughout this period (Susen, 2015), no discipline was as fundamentally transformed by it as sociocultural anthropology. As ethnography is based on the subjective experiences of the ethnographer and the intersubjective process of understanding other human beings, anthropology is especially vulnerable to critiques of objectivity and authority. More importantly, anthropology's role as the study of alterity and its historical entanglements with colonialism demanded examination of the power imbalances and political consequences of representing non-European 'others' from the privileged viewpoint of a predominantly white, male, elite academic researcher, alongside the ways an increasingly globalized world collapsed the conceptual binaries of 'home', 'field', 'native' and 'ethnographer' through which the discipline had operated. This self-examination crystallized in the influential volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcas, 1986) and the debates surrounding it, which critiqued the concept of culture, the essentializing nature of much ethnography and the forms of epistemic injustice implicit within elite Anglo-American anthropology as it had been traditionally practiced.

Consequently, anthropology from the 1980s became increasingly preoccupied with a poststructuralist investigation of forms of power hidden within social interactions and discourses, especially those inherent to its own practices, while attempting to describe underlying regularities, patterns or structures to social life and culture was increasingly rejected as intrinsically imperialistic: denying agency to others by imposing on them the ethnographer's categories of analysis. This resulted in a turn towards 'reflexivity' in the scrutiny of the anthropologist's positionality and a style of confessional writing that foregrounded the subjective experience of the ethnographer and their own life history. It also fragmented the discipline by removing the shared theoretical assumptions, questions and language which had unified scholars in what had been understood as the

common enterprise of comparatively studying culture and social structure. While responding to very real problems of representation, unequal power between the Global North and South and the hierarchization of knowledges (such that dominant groups and institutions continue to reproduce a Eurocentrically hegemonic perspective on the world), the effect was essentially conservative and depoliticizing. Rather than substantively reforming the institutional structures of the discipline or engaging in concrete political struggle, the mainstream of elite Anglo-American anthropology attempted to address these issues through the aesthetics of writing and an ever more inward-looking dissection of the implications of ethnographic practice at every level.

To be clear, this article does not seek to critique high postmodern theory or all decolonial scholarship. Much decolonial theory from the Global South (discussed in further depth later) embodies a serious and politically vital effort to understand the social reality of postcolonial societies and the contemporary world. Moreover, while it is impossible to summarize all key work even within anthropology, it is important to acknowledge the 'the decolonizing generation', who built on the contributions of the Black radical tradition of scholarship and activism centred around critiques of racial capitalism and solidarity with third world anti-colonial struggle (Allen and Jobson, 2016; Bolles, 2023). One such important contribution is the volume edited by Faye Harrison, *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (1997), which explicitly denounces the political economic inequalities between scholars in the Global North and South and calls for an anthropology of praxis that moves away from 'extractive' methodologies. Lastly, thoughtful contemporary interventions include Andrew Sanchez' reflection on the limitations of viewing decolonization as a zero-sum battle between generations and Alpa Shah's powerful critique of the appropriation of decolonial discourse by authoritarian and reactionary forces (Sanchez, 2023; Shah, 2024).

Instead, this article limits itself to analyzing how political economic changes which concurred with the proliferation of what was termed 'postmodern theory' during the 1980s and 1990s influenced a shift in the core methodological and theoretical orientation of the discipline, largely because this mirrored and reinforced the professional logics and subjectivities which emerged via the transformations to the institutional environments in which academic anthropologists operated, thereby facilitating certain forms of career progression. It is inaccurate to assert that most contemporary anthropologists are followers of high postmodern theory but the influence of what I term a 'postmodern orientation' has been widespread. This orientation rejects 'grand theory' and analysis of social structure, prioritizes self-reflection and emphasizes the diffuse, decentred and overdetermined nature of power and the social. Those taking this stance found their career facilitated, as they provided a hypostasized image of the world experienced by elite academics within the contemporary neoliberal higher education system, while failing to adequately consider the forms of economic power in which this is embedded. Moreover, this article's primary target is the adoption of a particular form of decolonial discourse by elite Anglo-American universities. These are the same universities at the forefront of the global financialization and commodification of higher education.

The tendency of anthropology and cognate disciplines to not analyze social structure, economic power and the global workings of capital, largely account for their failure to

critique this discourse and their complicity in reproducing a marketized customer service model of the university. This tendency is a particular example of the process described by Stephen Gill of the transformation of macro structures by capital, through which concepts and practices are institutionalized and form part of the habitus and personal worldview of social actors, in turn legitimating and reinforcing logics of capital accumulation while cannibalizing ideas and identities with radical potential (Gill, 1995). The following two sections describe this process in detail by outlining how shifts in anthropological theory and method were shaped by broader political economic changes which began to affect the environments in which scholars operated.

The fall of the faculty and the making of academic capitalism

Universities are curious institutions in capitalist society given that until recently they exhibited a continuity with social forms from the Late Middle Ages, having emerged as part of the mediaeval guild system in which specialists formed associations to regulate their profession. The word *universitas* denoted a group of scholars incorporated into a community rather than a physical space such as a modern campus, although over time universities began to hire facilities and were granted collective legal rights by European states. Despite originally focusing on educating the clergy, they became centres of study in law, philosophy, the training of state functionaries and the education of elites. Their ecclesiastical character began to disappear in the 19th century as they took on the role of educating the new professionals and bureaucrats required for industrial capitalism and modern states, while promoting scientific innovation and national culture.

The institutions which emerged during this time partly conform to the educational ideals of the philosopher Wilhelm Von Humboldt, who founded the University of Berlin. According to this model, universities should be understood as autonomous communities of scholars and students that combine teaching and research as an integrated process of self-cultivation and the pursuit of truth. While academia remained a deeply elitist enterprise that operated through networks of patronage and reproduced a limited and conservative perspective on the world, the fact that universities remained outside of the system of market relations meant their activities were guided by internal objectives under the direction of academic faculty.

With the social democratic consensus that followed World War Two, access to higher education expanded significantly. Western societies were distinguished by a Keynesian model which facilitated a tacit agreement between labour and capital to share the proceeds of economic growth and expand state institutions. This resulted in an enlargement of positive rights that sustained diverse movements to pursue the extension of social privileges to historically marginalized categories of people, such as the working class, women and minority ethnic groups. This is evident in distinct but overlapping ways in the United Kingdom and United States via the emergence of what can be termed the mid-20th century Fordist university system. Enrolment increased enormously as a result of public grants, such as those implemented by the U.S. G.I Bill, and new institutions were created, such as the U.K. ‘plate glass’ universities (Doyle and McMurray, 2022). With this massification of higher education, fresh generations of students began to

challenge the traditional model of academia as a disinterested and apolitical vocation, demanding their professors recognize their complicity in ongoing forms of inequality and oppression. The practices of critical social science which developed within this milieu were an evolution of 19th-century ideals in a more radically democratic direction (Doyle and McMurray, 2022). Within certain currents of disciplines such as anthropology or sociology, the role of the social scientist became one of not just studying society but doing so in order to transform it.

However, in the 1980s, a series of political and economic changes, often referred to as neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), began to transform the internal political economy of universities. Governments, like those of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, influenced by the ideas of monetarism and the Chicago School of economics, pursued mass privatization and new forms of public management under the belief that the extension of the market and its logic of rational calculation into all areas of society was the best way of ensuring efficiency, transparency and freedom. At the same time, entire social spheres that had previously been maintained outside of the market were converted into domains for capital accumulation. The effects on universities are complex and followed interlinked processes of reform which can be characterized as marketization, privatization and financialization (Vernon, 2018).

The first of these implemented new systems of management and 'audit cultures' that submitted universities to quantified systems for measuring efficiency, including the Research Excellence Framework and various 'teaching quality' assessments applied in the United Kingdom (Gledhill, 2020), which use statistical metrics to establish rankings and access to funding (Shore and Wright, 2015). These reforms were accompanied by the growth of a new class of university managers, administrators and consultants, charged with running the university according to market principles of rational efficiency (Ginsberg, 2011). Privatization, involving the increase in tuition following decline in state and federal subsidy and the self-imposed asset-stripping of institutions via selling land and buildings, contracting out university services and instituting 'public–private partnerships', works in concert with technologies of marketization to present the restructuring of the university as an inescapable fact. Students faced with rising tuition fees, increased debt and a saturated labour market, are compelled to view their degree as an investment in future career earnings rather than as a means to develop their understanding of the world and role within it.

Meanwhile, the financial pressures of privatization undermine the autonomy and working conditions of academic staff, who have suffered a collapse in their living standards and the widespread casualization of their profession, with over 80% of teaching in U.S. institutions performed by non-tenured faculty, alongside the proliferation of adjunct or 'zero hours' contracts (Shore and Wright, 2015). In the United Kingdom, the abolition of the 'block grant' system – which had allocated funding for teaching on a per student basis – resulted in an acceleration of the logics of marketization, an increased reliance on overseas fee income and a paradoxical atmosphere of permanent crisis in the midst of expansion and abundance, as recently privatized public institutions with limited financial reserves catastrophized the consequences of year-by-year drops in student numbers (Doyle and McMurray, 2022). It has also led to aggressive plans to 'recruit' increasing

numbers of domestic and international students, requiring vast infrastructure investment funded by borrowing on capital markets. As universities become more indebted and even directly engage in speculative investments to fund amenities and administration, they are increasingly financialized: beholden to finance capital, governed by financial logics and converted into a key element of the system of rent extraction that underpins contemporary capitalism, through which the average citizen is obliged to take on huge levels of private debt to be repaid to the Finance, Insurance and Real Estate sectors.

Among the effects of privatization, marketization and financialization has been a marked a decline in an 'academic commons' for scholars working collaboratively in the pursuit of knowledge in favour of 'academic capitalism' (Münch, 2014). Research funding became based on highly competitive and bureaucratized forms of competitive tender and academics were encouraged to compete for prestige and build individual 'research profiles', driven by the precaritization of their profession and the demands of universities competing among themselves within a system that funnelled resources upwards towards a tiny elite group of institutions (Münch, 2014). This has been accompanied by a rise in the managerial bureaucratization of every element of academic life, alongside the transfer of power to a new class of managers, often drawn from scholars, for whom administration now represents the most lucrative career possibility. Most importantly, it has produced unprecedented inequalities among academic staff, with huge research grants awarded to a new breed of 'superstar' professor at the same time that a swelling underclass of casualized and precarious faculty carry out the majority of teaching and research (UCU, 2019).

Therefore, despite important historical and ongoing differences in funding and managerial models between the United States and the United Kingdom (where the U.S. system relies heavily on a mix of tuition fees, public research income, and private endowments, with comparatively decentralized governance, while the U.K. historically emphasized more centralized government funding and tighter regulatory oversight), the two have substantially converged in their embrace of marketization and commodification. Together, they embody a model some have termed the Anglo-American Public Research University, which serves as the globally hegemonic framework within a new market-based, globalized higher education system, prioritizing competition for research funding, fee income, and governance grounded in neoliberal rationalities (Harvie et al., 2022).

Economic power and the failure of the postmodern turn

The theoretical fragmentation of anthropology and cognate disciplines that occurred during this period must be understood as operating in concert with these new political economic conditions. During the mid-20th century, when universities were public institutions managed primarily by tenured faculty who competed for prestige and promotion within an 'academic commons', the route to career success was through developing a novel theoretical perspective or allying oneself to one or other contested position within an existing research field (Bourdieu, 1984). While this euphemized hierarchies and systems of patronage, leading to sometimes interminable and abstruse debates in anthropology (e.g. kinship as structure or descent and economic substantivism versus formalism), it

cultivated an environment in which scholars collaborated in the construction of knowledge.

Conversely, the figure of the lone academic competing in a hyper-individualized and fragmented profession for superstar status is best served by staking out a unique and bounded piece of research they can fully make their own. The logics of marketization also compel scholars from the very start of their careers to curate a distinctive profile or 'brand' in which their personal identity and life history is tied to their research, while making bold claims to its novelty and depth before they have had an opportunity to acquire the skillsets, data and breadth of knowledge which were traditionally considered prerequisites for groundbreaking work. A turn towards reflexivity and a new confessional style of writing meant that professional anthropology became increasingly focused on narrativizing one's individual identity and locating oneself within structures of power. While this is arguably a form of performance congruent with the audit culture of constant self-assessment (Skeggs, 2002), it also facilitates the construction of a unique profile through which to compete in the academic marketplace. Meanwhile, apparently radical poststructuralist-influenced critiques of anthropological grand theory permitted researchers to disregard the fixity of existing debates and scholarly standards and claim an entirely new position within any area, based on some combination of blurring boundaries, multiplying and violating meanings and declaring everything to be in constant flux and movement.

Despite the fact universities are no longer fully autonomous spheres of intellectual production driven by non-market values, within disciplines such as anthropology, there remains a sense – honed by anthropology's engagement in liberation struggles in the 1960s–1970s – that research *should* be driven by a commitment to progressive values and social change. Moreover, given this continued perception of anthropology's identity, it is professionally useful to performatively demonstrate one's adherence to some politically progressive position. In this context, the game becomes one of expressing ideas that have the appearance of being radical, but do not offer any serious challenge to existing power structures. A simplistic interpretation of Foucauldian theory permits politics to be regarded as operating, not at the level of material conditions and physical coercion, but entirely through ideas, discourses and subtle forms of decentred influence. To effect political and social change, therefore, it suffices to produce 'oppositional knowledge' and to reflexively deconstruct the networks of power-knowledge in which one is implicated, starting with the practices and perspectives of academic anthropology itself. In this way, it is possible to declare oneself an activist scholar while not taking part in any concrete political actions or risking one's physical safety and professional livelihood. Similarly, reflexivity as a style of confessional meditation on the nature of one's power and privilege is a way of demonstrating moral status, while leaving the social structures which produce said privilege intact. It says little about how to effect change and crucially what sort of practices, institutions and relationships should be sought as an alternative.

Furthermore, one of the principal effects of the postmodern turn has been to make anthropological theory blind to the operation of economic power via social institutions, most ironically the institution of the university in which anthropologists themselves act. Despite these limitations, the popularity of this theoretical orientation can be partly

explained by how perfectly it described the world as experienced by scholars in Anglo-American universities. While academics are still permitted a relatively high degree of autonomy, their subjectivities have been characteristic of the changes to the inner worlds of the professional middle classes experienced from the 1980s onwards: anxiously aware of the increased competitiveness of their field and the growing difficulty of reproducing their class position (Ehrenreich, 2020). They therefore tend to experience power as a sort of Foucauldian self-monitoring within an environment dominated by veiled hierarchies, patronage networks and reputation.

Moreover, the depiction of globalization as seamless movement of deterritorialized flows and 'scapes' (that purported to problematize the binary oppositions produced by colonialism) (Appadurai, 1990), while arguably describing little of the realities of the contemporary world for most people, was congruent with the experience of transnational elites, of which academic anthropologists form one albeit quite marginal subset: disembedded from any local community, as they move between jobs across national borders within an increasingly narrow professional and social environment.

David Graeber commented on the limitations of what he termed 'vulgar Foucauldianism' to describe the operation of power, arguing that hierarchy and domination are still underwritten by coercive force or its threat, something which is not obvious to academics who form part of a broader professional managerial class who do not personally experience the violence inherent to neoliberal capitalism and tend to identify with the systems of bureaucratic rules and ideologies that serve to obscure it (Graeber, 2012, 2016). While I partially agree with this analysis, the transformation of the contemporary university, academic subjectivities and social theory cannot be explained without reference to economic power.

A number of theorists have maintained that within capitalist society three basic forms of power operate in concert (see e.g. Du Bois, 2020; Gramsci, 1998; Hall, 1986; Marx and Engels, 2020). These are economic power, coercive force and ideology: how dominant ideas 'shape the way in which we (consciously or unconsciously) perceive and understand ourselves and our world' (Mau, 2021: 4). Yet as philosopher Søren Mau observes, contrary to much Marxist and radical scholarly discussion of violence and its legitimation, Marx described how capitalism is primarily reproduced not through violent coercion but the 'mute compulsion of economic relations': an impersonal and abstract mode of domination embedded within economic processes themselves. Once workers are fully proletarianized (i.e. separated from control of the means of production and subsistence), they are compelled to sell their labour in order to secure the necessities of life. Active participation in the reproduction of capitalism is therefore not primarily the result of the threat of force or the 'false consciousness' of the working class, but the ways the material conditions of social reproduction are reconfigured into independent units to be reconnected via market transactions (Mau, 2021). Moreover, competition between the owners of capitalist enterprises to increase profits and between workers to secure the means of life, makes all individuals subject to the imperatives of capital – the form of social relation in which profit extracted from human labour must be constantly reinvested – that takes on the character of an impersonal abstract force. It is through

this dynamic that economic, coercive and ideological power work in concert to restructure social relations, nature and the labour process.

The transformation of the modern university is a salient example of how these forms of power function together. To fundamentally reshape academics' subjectivities, it would not be sufficient for a new set of discourses to emerge surrounding the nature of university teaching and research. Instead, scholars are compelled to follow the logics of marketization and financialization because of a system of economic incentives which have restructured the academic labour process. Yet in doing so they must also adopt a new language that reflects and make real the abstractions (e.g. 'student satisfaction', 'class deliverables', 'research outputs') through which the system operates (Shore and Wright, 2015). Meanwhile, physical coercion is employed when there is direct political opposition to constructing the university as a marketized and financialized institution, as happened during the U.K. student protests of the 2010s and the recent U.S. protests for divestment from Israeli companies, which saw campus security and police deploy violence against unarmed protestors. Lastly, by reconfiguring the conditions through which knowledge is produced, academic theory and practice are themselves transformed in ways that legitimate and facilitate economic power. The following sections explore how this new scholarly orientation converges with discourses on decolonization that support the restructuring of the university and deepen epistemic injustice rooted in colonialism.

The crisis of coloniality in the modern university

Calls for the decolonization of the university rose to prominence with the Rhodes Must Fall protests, which began in Pretoria in 2016 before spreading to Oxford, Harvard, Berkeley and other institutions. Such initiatives were largely protagonized by students from racialized minority groups, alongside some members of faculty (Shain et al., 2021). Although these grassroots movements involved 'a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 2), they take as their target the Eurocentrism and coloniality of elite universities (Schramm, 2025).

'Coloniality' is a concept with a significant academic history. It is strongly associated with the heterodox Peruvian Marxist, Aníbal Quijano, but has been used widely by progressive intellectuals from the Global South to analyze the complex social realities of their postcolonial societies (Cusicanqui, 2012; Lugones, 2016; Quijano, 2000). In broad terms, it refers to how legacies of European colonialism are reproduced in social orders and systems of knowledge that outlived colonial rule. The historical process in which European nation states established global hegemony through violent conquest, dispossession and genocide, produced not only a worldwide political and economic order but a singular viewpoint on the world. European Powers repressed the knowledge and social lives of dominated peoples, in essence not only politically and economically marginalizing them but also colonizing their cognitive perspectives and modes of producing and giving meaning (Quijano, 2000). The globally hegemonic knowledge this generated, which includes notions of linear temporality, the separation of nature and culture, alongside concepts of race, gender and sexuality, supported a new order of power, in which the totality of human life was subsumed within the work discipline of capitalist production and

bureaucratic control of modern states (Doyle, 2024). Coloniality, therefore refers to the complex enmeshment of ideological, economic and coercive power which continues to reproduce forms of hierarchy, exploitation and discrimination, including classism, racism, patriarchy and the domination of the Global South by the Global North.

During the last five hundred years, universities have played a key role in marginalizing the knowledges of colonized peoples and reproducing structures of epistemic, political and economic inequality. From the 16th century onwards, the global spread of universities, starting with those established in the Spanish Americas, created a hierarchy of knowledges, such that the ways of knowing and being of colonized peoples were devalued and relegated to the status of folklore. Universities have throughout their history been a tool of nation-building as an arm of the state, through promoting a national culture and educating elites and professionals (Collini, 2012). Yet this is especially true in postcolonial societies, often defined by high levels of inequality and ethnically and culturally diverse populations, explaining why universities have represented a political battleground over the definition of the nation (Ivancheva, 2023). Universities are also privilege factories that traditionally prepared elites for entry into the ruling class and legitimated social hierarchy through the transfer of cultural capital: the knowledge and learnt habits which confer status and power (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet the Eurocentric nature of this knowledge is key to maintaining internal colonialism: referring to inequalities within postcolonial societies, often between regions and ethnic groups, while constructing a national culture and perspective at odds with the experiences of the majority population. Internal colonialism is also reproduced through the tradition of postcolonial elites seeking education within the universities of the former metropole, through which they become socialized into a Eurocentric cultural perspective and reinforce hierarchies between the educational institutions of the global North and South.

Nevertheless, universities have long been characterized by a dialectical interplay between the exigencies of ruling elites and the internal logics and values of scholarly communities (Doyle and McMurray, 2022). As semi-autonomous institutions, neither subsumed within capitalist economic relations which restructure the labour process, nor systems of rationalized bureaucracy that reproduce arbitrary forms of domination (Graeber, 2016), their internal scholarly activity was directed by the imperative to produce non-instrumental knowledge, even if this was carried out largely by white European males and offered a limited and conservative perspective on the world. For example, while the study of oriental languages and disciplines such as anthropology were originally regarded as a means of training colonial administrators, they became inwardly directed towards second-order enquiries concerning the basis of the knowledge they produce and its boundaries, limitations and ultimate ends (Collini, 2012). In the case of anthropology, this resulted in scholarly work, which despite its limitations, produced impactful critiques of the racism inherent to European societies in the early 20th century (Stocking, 1968).

It is therefore crucial to note that the recent decolonization movements have occurred precisely during a period in which academic capitalism has taken complete hold of universities. The present generation of students find themselves in what amounts to a system of debt peonage, as the massification of higher education and hyper-credentialization of

work have made a college degree the entrance requirement for most jobs that provide a stable life; obliging them to accumulate large amounts of personal debt, much of which will ultimately be repaid to the banks and hedge funds to which financialized universities have indebted themselves. This is at the same time that the value of a degree as a means to social mobility has collapsed under the weight of a saturated graduate labour market and the broader effects of neoliberal capitalism (Standing, 2011). Students from racialized minority groups and working-class backgrounds are faced with this bleak reality at the same time they have to navigate the forms of discrimination rooted in the elitism of the university.

Accordingly, their demands are indicative of how the university is being riven by two conflicting processes. On the one hand, the massification of higher education has permitted new social strata entrance to the university, enlarging the size and diversity of the student body and forcing a confrontation with its colonial past. On the other hand, the pressures of financialization oblige universities to increasingly submit to the logics of capitalism, which has only deepened their elitism and opened them up to compliance with authoritarian rule. Despite their mischaracterization as empty protests by overly sensitive 'woke' students, movements such as Rhodes Must Fall were concerned with broadening access to higher education, the affordability of student housing and the effects of marketization (Gebrial, 2018; Shain et al., 2021). In this context, demands for decolonization must be understood as part of wider calls to critically question the purpose of the university and to democratically transform it (Bhambra et al., 2018). Interrogating and undoing its coloniality means departing from individualizing and ahistorical notions of equality and meritocracy. This involves not only discussing the transnational material histories of racial, epistemic and socioeconomic injustice at different scales, but substantively reforming modes of governance and political economic structures both within the university and the wider world.

'Decolonization' as neoliberal ideology

Beginning in 2020, a noticeable shift occurred in higher education institutions embracing the language of decolonization and anti-racism and introducing management-led initiatives, often aimed at 'decolonizing the curriculum' (Shain et al., 2021). This took place in the context of widespread protests, following the racist police killing of George Floyd on 25th May 2020 and an ongoing financial crisis. In the United Kingdom, where the elite 'Russell Group' institutions became increasingly reliant on international student fee income, withdrawal from the EU combined with stricter student visa regulations threatened the market position of the U.K. higher education sector. Decolonization therefore became strategically important, as higher education providers competed for students, especially from the Global South, in order to demonstrate their inclusivity, internationally oriented focus and anti-racist commitments. Shain et al. (2021) have argued this is an example of what the critical legal scholar, Derrick Bell, terms 'interest convergence': when the interests of majority populations and elites converge with the demands of minority groups to permit limited steps towards social change; such as when the supreme

court desegregated schools in the context of competition between the United States and the USSR to influence African and Asian states during the Cold War (Bell, 1980).

However, I contend this is best characterized as a form of what the philosopher, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwo, terms 'elite capture': a process whereby political projects are hijacked by elite groups (Táíwò, 2022b). I maintain this is the case because the form in which academic capitalism articulates with existing academic colonialism prevented any meaningful decolonization from being implemented. Not only are universities in the Global North imbricated within colonial systems of power and continue to reproduce neo-colonial hierarchies, but this was only strengthened by their marketization and financialization. The ongoing global transformation of systems of higher learning into capitalist enterprises is a vastly unequal process that privileges established universities in the Global North. Their long association with elites and position within centres of global capital accumulation, combined with Eurocentric biases in key mechanisms of marketization, such as global university ranking systems, have allowed them to position themselves at the forefront of these developments. What is often termed the internationalization of higher education has produced a worldwide rush to deliver courses in the English language, homogenize syllabi and market degrees to international students. While U.K. institutions have been well-placed to capitalize on this phenomenon, they are paradoxically increasingly financially precarious, dependent on fee income, burdened with debt and committed to ambitious expansion plans (Mcgettigan, 2015).

The commercial logics of universities run as capitalist enterprises therefore render them incapable of genuinely reforming their elitist character. The product sold under conditions of marketization is not so much an 'educational service' in the form of training or classes, but rather the reputational value of the diploma the university awards for the purpose of building graduates' professional profiles. In order to maintain its value, it must therefore remain a scarce good and any significant measures to increase access or open the university to the wider community will, especially for the most elite institutions, ultimately run contrary to their underlying business model.

Meanwhile, the *international* value of diplomas has relied on preserving the fiction that universities within former colonial metropoles are the shining centre of enlightened enquiry about the world. Universities thereby continued their role as privilege factories, conferring cultural capital to a restricted although increasingly transnational elite. Yet they also reproduce internal colonialism within postcolonial societies and academic hierarchies between the Global North and South, by continuing to educate postcolonial elites abroad and devaluing local knowledge. It is precisely those institutions of the Global South most opposed to university capitalism, representative of the perspectives and lifeways of colonized peoples and productive of genuinely radical knowledge and political action – free, public, regional, indigenous and intercultural universities which serve poor, rural, indigenous and peasant peoples – that face near certain demise in the current global higher education system (Doyle, 2022).

Since 2020, the United Kingdom has witnessed university-wide management-led decolonial moves by several leading research-intensive and Russell Group universities, alongside the widespread adoption of decolonial discourse in senior management communications (Naseem, 2024). Notably, the measures adopted to 'mainstream'

decolonizing work have concentrated on changes to curricula, public talks and disseminating 'toolkits' for academics to change their teaching and research practices (Shain et al., 2021). These include official 'checklists for inclusivity' in curricula design, which largely emphasize including figures from different ethnicities in course reading lists, use of inclusive language and strategies for engaging students from diverse backgrounds (Naseem, 2024). While this could potentially make teaching more inclusive, it has been criticized by students and staff as having little to do with decolonization in a meaningful sense, failing to address problems at a structural level and in the worst analysis merely reflecting a need to satisfy 'student customers' from an increasingly international background (Naseem, 2024). Such initiatives also tend to include decolonization under the umbrella of race equality and general equality, diversity and inclusion or diversity, equity and inclusion policy, which in the current marketized corporate model of the university reflect the need to respond to equality legislation and protect institutions against legal and reputational damage. These measures followed a liberal multiculturalist framework, which as Paul Gilroy has observed, characterizes inequality and injustice purely in terms of hierarchical differences between individuals defined via essentialized identity categories (Gilroy, 1990). Accordingly, antiracism and social justice have been equated with promoting individual betterment and diversification within existing social structures rather than systemic change.

In this iteration 'decolonization' has played an ideological role analogous to the branding and reputational management strategies employed by large multinational corporations. This similarity should be unsurprising given their transformation into bureaucratized capitalist enterprises competing for market share and run by a managerial caste who view their role fundamentally as business administrators rather than governors of public bodies. While adopting measures which do nothing to substantively alter the university at an institutional level, management can effectively divert conversations about its reform away from the impoverishment of precaritized academic staff and indebted students or the conversion of the academy into a business.

Within institutions which officially adopted the language of decolonization, attempts by staff and students to address global inequalities in research funding and capacity or to make universities welcoming and inclusive to broader communities have often run up against the reality of the university's underlying political economy. A colleague who conducted a study within a Russell Group university on how to decolonize research through equal international collaborations and capacity-building for scientific institutions in the Global South was informed by a management figure that 'decolonization' is only something that applies to the social sciences and humanities and not to the 'hard' sciences. Some of the same U.K. institutions which have endorsed official 'decolonization' initiatives have not applied for recognition as 'universities of sanctuary', which requires commitment to making campuses safe spaces for refugees while broadening the definition of 'widening access and engagement' to forced migrants. Both cases illustrate the limitations of managerial endorsement of decolonization, as equalizing access to resources and opening university admissions to impoverished and marginalized groups run counter to their core business model.

Moreover, 'decolonization' has increasingly been used to justify the restructuring of courses, changes to management and the dilution of academic autonomy. This does

not refer to holistic decolonizing reform so much as the insertion of the term 'decolonization' into top-down changes which increase the bureaucratic power of senior administrators. These include the standardization of academic programmes and the imposition of quantitative metrics for measuring student satisfaction and staff performance. Several commentators have noted that decolonization discourse is metaphorical, vague and empty beyond its literal meaning of gaining national independence or control of appropriated lands from colonizers (Táíwò, 2022a; Tuck and Yang, 2012). Yet it is precisely its ambiguous and polysemic nature that qualifies it as a means for university administrators to justify the further imposition of neoliberal governance. 'Decolonization' here resembles what Ernesto Laclau terms an empty signifier, deriving its rhetorical force from equivocating multiple concepts and political demands which are then hegemonically subordinated to dominant interests (Laclau, 2005). While academics may oppose systems of quantified accountability that render higher education a customer service, when this is presented as 'decolonial work', it becomes considerably harder to resist. This is despite the absurdity of attempting to enact what can only be achieved through laborious structural change both within and outside the university via top-down processes of curricular redesign or monitoring student feedback and satisfaction.

Furthermore, what I have termed the postmodern orientation which has become dominant within anthropology and cognate disciplines provided theoretical justification for portraying the bureaucratic restructuring of the university along business lines as 'decolonization'. It also arguably represented the ideal position for academics who look to project an apparent radicalism while ascending the career ladder towards a senior administrative role. If social change is equated with unveiling the hidden operations of power through analysis of discourse and the micropolitics of everyday interactions, then the sorts of management-led initiatives of changing curricula and language – exempt from any structural reforms – can be represented as vital decolonial work at the cutting edge of progressive university politics. In this way, scholars can display their 'decolonial' credentials without upsetting management and while helping to institute the very neoliberal logics which reproduce socioeconomic, racial and epistemic inequalities and destroy the centres of resistance against the new internationalized higher education economy.

Academic anthropology and other social sciences are dealing with a profound crisis brought about by the ongoing marketization, privatization and financialization of the universities in which they operate. The widespread inability to articulate or enact real decolonization, or the undoing of coloniality as a material process, is explained by two interdependent effects of this development. Firstly, while universities were once semi-autonomous institutions, albeit largely populated by elite groups who viewed themselves as separate from wider society, academics are now increasingly disembedded from any community and compelled to compete as entrepreneurs in a fragmented and dizzyingly unequal environment. Secondly, as is particularly pronounced within anthropology, a theoretical orientation that rejects grand theory and analysis of structure, limits scholars' capacity to critically examine the very forms of power to which they are subject. The second of these effects is partly the result of the first: the remoulding of the academic labour process through which scholars produce knowledge and acquire a professional habitus. Yet changes to the theory and practice of academic disciplines facilitate the

further extension of market logics, by naturalizing the abstractions upon which the neoliberal academy relies, rendering knowledge the discrete personal property of a lone researcher with a unique profile that adds value to the institution, through helping it to compete for prestige and funding and recruit and satisfy student customers. It is in these circumstances that 'decolonization' served to legitimate these new configurations of economic power, delimiting the terms of conversation over higher education reform and tacitly promoting a particular version of the university.

The university as battleground of authoritarian capitalism

U.S. college campuses have witnessed enormous waves of protest over the ongoing Gaza war, authoritarian crackdowns by police in collusion with university management and attempts by the Trump administration to limit the freedom and autonomy of higher education institutions (Benderet al., 2025). The seeming contradiction between the rhetoric of university administrations and their increasingly authoritarian actions beside a right-wing government denouncing institutions responsible for the reproduction of social elites as hotbeds of leftist extremism may appear puzzling. Nonetheless, both developments may be regarded as manifestations of processes of economic, ideological and coercive power within contemporary capitalism, as it undergoes a transformation towards a more authoritarian and oligarchic form marked by increased violence and the destruction of institutions that uphold the liberal democratic order. While analysis of the conjuncture provides broader conclusions for understanding this authoritarian turn and the role of universities as battlegrounds for the future of democracy, for the sake of brevity I limit discussion to the United States.

The Israeli invasion of Gaza in response to the 7th October 2023 attacks and subsequent mass bombing, forced displacement of the population and humanitarian blockade are described variously by human rights organizations and academic experts as ethnic cleansing and genocide (Ziadah, 2025). Protests erupted in support of the human rights of Gaza's civilian population throughout the world, including on many university campuses. In the United States, over three thousand students were arrested in protests, most notably at Columbia University in New York, where the president authorized the New York City Police Department to enter the campus to conduct mass arrests. Chief among protestors' demands were divestment of universities from Israeli companies, echoing the previous campaign against the government of South Africa. Nevertheless, the Trump administration has claimed that universities have done little to combat extremism, antisemitism and promote 'viewpoint diversity', using campus protests in institutions like Columbia as justification for demanding external control over hiring, admissions, governance and academic programmes. It has also deported over a thousand international students for involvement in political activity related to the Gaza protests (Ziadah, 2025).

To return to the discussion of ideological, economic and coercive power within capitalism, violence is deployed when direct political opposition is brought against capital (Mau, 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that the university administrations which did not cede to protestors' demands for divestment and reacted in the most authoritarian

manner, were precisely institutions, such as Columbia, with vast endowments. Elite Ivy League institutions hold billions of dollars in financial investment vehicles. University boards, which oversee their strategic operation and appoint senior management, are largely composed of figures from the corporate and financial sectors. The fact that protestors called for divestment and the transparency of endowment funds represented a challenge to the logic of universities as financialized entities, which must seek to preserve their return on investment. Yet by protesting the Israeli state's actions through the language of decolonization, which had been captured by senior university administrators, they exposed the emptiness of such managerial discourse.

Meanwhile, 'Trumpism' as part of an emergent global identitarian right, exhibits certain structural similarities to early 20th-century fascism. Fascism was a response to the inability of the liberal democratic order to contain the contradictions produced by capitalism, notably the social dislocation wrought by the transformation of the labour process and erosion of traditional forms of life, alongside the gradual impoverishment of the mass of the population, as growing wealth inequality transferred asset holdings upwards to a tiny elite (Paxton, 2004). As a political movement, it represented a 'radicalism of the centre', with its base of support composed of the downwardly mobile class fractions of small business owners, land owning farmers and skilled artisanal workers, who experienced a collapse in their social standing and living standards. Ideologically, it took the form of a radical conservatism which sought not to preserve the status quo but to re-order society to return to an imagined ideal past (Paxton, 2004). Its mass appeal was in directing popular discontent towards perceived internal others regarded as responsible for the decline in the material and moral greatness of the national community, including 'liberal elites', the intelligentsia, 'social deviants' and racialized minority groups (Arendt, 2017).

Yet fascist regimes were never able to achieve power without the support of sections of capitalist elites, including conservative and liberal politicians, who sought to employ them to combat the disillusionment of the electorate with mainstream politics and the challenge of popular left forces (Paxton, 2004). Moreover, despite their revolutionary promise to make society great again and promote economic autarky, they did not seriously challenge the power of capital. In effect, fascism channels the discontent produced by the socially dislocating effects of capital accumulation into a movement which eliminates challenges to its reproduction within civil society via the use of force, nationalism, intensified racism, and the destruction of democracy. Trumpism, while comprising a diverse alliance of movements, actors and social constituencies, to a significant degree represents a grouping of corporate oligarchs, tech billionaires and financial capitalists, who have increasingly stated explicitly their view that liberal democracy and the post-war social democratic state are an illegitimate hindrance to the proper functioning of capitalism (Slobodian, 2025).

The current conjuncture is therefore one in which violent authoritarianism is deployed in distinct contexts against challenges to the reproduction of capital which cannot be restrained through ideology or economic power. Yet it is important to note that universities remain institutions which, despite their financialization and status as privilege factories, bestow an incomparably high degree of autonomy to individuals to generate knowledge. It is this enduring reality which underwrites both their potential for promoting positive social change and threat to authoritarian governments.

In this conjuncture there exist at least three versions of the university simultaneously. The first is the financialized institution described in depth earlier. The second is the traditional university as an autonomous community of learning, expressed in idealized form in the Humboldtian model of *bildung* or self-cultivation, which nonetheless remains conservative in failing to challenge the status quo. The third is the university *in potentia* as a radical space of democracy and refuge for marginalized groups. The latter two versions of the university are enacted in the practices and values of students and faculty and interact unevenly with each other and the political economy of the university as a transnational business. It was the third version of the university which entered directly in conflict with the first in the campus protests of recent years.

Meanwhile, it is the latter two models of the university which the Trump administration seeks to destroy in its battle against liberal elites, the intelligentsia and popular left forces. By channelling the discontent, class hatred and prejudices of its political bases towards the hypocrisy of liberal elites and 'woke ideology' as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005), it aims to control a key social institution and undermine the capacity of civil society for collective resistance. For those who seek to enact decolonization in a meaningful sense of making universities genuinely open and democratic spaces which address global inequalities, it is therefore necessary to participate in defending higher education against the new identitarian right while continuing to seek its reform. This requires strategic alliances with university administrations and more conservative elements of faculty who nonetheless defend academic freedom and autonomy.

Practising decolonization in the neoliberal academy

By way of conclusion, I wish to reflect on what genuine decolonization demands. Here I draw inspiration from the Bolivian Aymara indigenous scholar, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who has spent most of her life involved in decolonial politics and the critique of Eurocentric epistemologies. In a forceful intervention on decolonial discourse in contemporary academia, Cusicanqui writes about how theories and concepts from the Global South have been appropriated by academics in elite Anglo-American institutions, who reproduce them in an abstracted and depoliticized form, removed from the material social struggles which gave them meaning.

> …it is necessary to leave the sphere of the superstructures in order to analyze the economic strategies and material mechanisms that operate behind discourses. The postcolonial discourse of North America is not only an economy of ideas, but it is also an economy of salaries, perks, and privileges that certifies value through the granting of diplomas, scholarships, and master's degrees and through teaching and publishing opportunities. For obvious reasons and as the crisis deepens in public universities in Latin America, this kind of structure is well suited to the exercise of patronage as a mode of colonial domination. Through the game of who cites whom, hierarchies are structured, and we end up having to consume, in a regurgitated form, the very ideas…that we indigenous people and intellectuals have produced independently … enthroning within the academy a limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization…. (Cusicanqui, 2012: 102–103)

The spread of this depoliticized decolonial discourse not only creates tiny 'empires within empires' for certain academics but undermines the political efforts of peoples of the Global South, through ideologically legitimating multiculturalist frameworks for inclusion, which in countries like Bolivia, co-opted indigenous social movements to support the interests and neoliberal policy agendas of national elites. Such frameworks draw on essentializing identity categories which do not properly account for the historical material processes of colonization that shape the present, while prescribing policies divorced from the structural reforms which would empower subalternized peoples. Cusicanqui concludes that intellectuals in the Global South must free themselves from such academic colonialism and produce nuanced analyses of colonial power, with the aim of effecting political change, concluding that there '…can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice' (Cusicanqui, 2012: 100).

Those of us situated in the elite institutions Cusicanqui refers to should begin by seeking to undo these academic hierarchies and epistemic inequalities between the Global North and South. Yet given the impossibility of achieving this within the present neoliberal system, decolonization of the university in any meaningful sense is inseparable from its decommodification, implying liberation from the sphere of market relations and bureaucratic systems of power, to become an autonomous space of meaning and human value. Consequently, scholars and activists in the former metropoles of European colonial empires who seek decolonization must find common cause with campaigns against the global marketization of higher education and academics, intellectuals and social movements of the Global South. They must take advantage of the possibilities opened up by the managerial adoption of the language of decolonization, while working beyond its limitations. This requires a coordination of movements both within and outside the academy. It means engaging in forms of prefigurative politics that resist the commodification of knowledge and its bureaucratic governance and elitist enclosure: constructing the university as a community led by values of learning and the pursuit of truth, while opening it to wider society and democratically negotiating the knowledge it produces. It is important to recognize that despite its historical role in the colonial enterprise, the university was not fully subject to the colonization of lifeworlds by processes of capitalist modernity described earlier. Consequently, its global marketization, rather than representing decolonization, signifies its insertion into coloniality in more insidious, damaging and pervasive forms. The aim should therefore not be to reject the ideals and practices of the university as a community of learning but to fully realize them in plural, inclusive and democratic ways.

Moreover, the nature of coloniality as a system of power means that its undoing cannot be achieved through isolated reform of pedagogy, epistemology, changes to reading lists or carrying out research in an ever more reflexive way. Academic disciplines such as anthropology cannot hope to untangle themselves from colonialism without altering the broader political, economic and epistemic structures in which they are imbricated. A decolonial anthropology therefore requires both an epistemological commitment to frankly examine the historical material processes that produce coloniality and the conditions of its own knowledge, and a political commitment to change them. It is the

limitations of a theoretical orientation which fails to account for the forms of economic power shaping modern public research universities that has contributed to decolonization being framed as a parochial dispute within the cloisters of elite academia, rather than a serious discussion about substantively reforming the structures of higher education at a global level and equalizing institutionalized access to power and resources.

My own modest decolonial efforts include collaborating with indigenous intellectuals, social movements in Latin America and refugee scholars in Turkey, who have created their own universities, to help build capacity, foster intellectual exchange and find ways of collectively opposing the structures which continue to reproduce hierarchies in global systems of knowledge production. With these initiatives I seek two complementary goals which are essential to any attempts to decolonize the practices of academia and the institution of the university. The first is to construct alternative centres of power and the second is to transform the university from within, bringing it closer to the ideal of a plural, democratic and open community. The former is exemplified within anthropology by Faye Harrison's efforts to build formal associations and academic venues for Black scholars and intellectuals from the Global South. The latter can be seen in initiatives, such as those led by Prem Kumar Ranjaram, Ian M. Cook, Céline Cantat and others, to 'open up' the university to migrants and forcibly displaced persons and in the process seek its transformation (Cantat et al., 2024). While this inevitably runs up against the limitations of the university's underlying political economy, it visibilizes forms of exclusion and injustice, fosters alliances and builds the political basis for change. These two examples are by no means exhaustive but illustrate the genuine decolonial work that continues to take place in the academy, much of which does not explicitly refer to itself as such.

This article has attempted to highlight the political economic processes which undergird how elite higher education institutions are implicated in the reproduction of social inequality, the uneven and restricted movement of people and ideas, and systems of debt peonage and financialized capitalism. Outside and within these universities, there exist social movements which seek the free movement of human beings, liberation from the coercive effects of debt and solidarity with peoples of the Global South. Those of us privileged enough to work within them must question our own role in these processes and engage in praxis: combining theorization with attempts to bring about change. This can only be achieved through concrete political action alongside subalternized peoples while balancing the compromises of working within existing structures with seeking means of transcending them. To take part even in a small way in such work is difficult and unlike management-led 'decolonization' involves sacrifice within a system whose economic logics compel academics to follow self-seeking and careerist behaviour. Yet it is only through this sort of engagement that we can see beyond the limits of the institutional environment of the contemporary university, which reproduces elitism and coloniality even while claiming to do the very opposite.

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