



Confronting the Colonial Library: Teaching Political Studies Amidst Calls for a Decolonised Curriculum

Sally Matthews

Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper engages with Mudimbe's concept of the 'colonial library' with the aim of using this engagement to contribute to current debates about decolonising South African university curricula. The term 'colonial library' refers to the body of texts and epistemological order which construct Africa as a symbol of otherness and inferiority. Mudimbe shows that even the most determined attempts to resist the colonial library draw on this same epistemological order. This presents a profound challenge for attempts to decolonise university curricula as it suggests that the colonial library's reach extends into attempts to dismantle it. In response to this challenge, I discuss ways in which we can oppose epistemological ethnocentrism and argue that we need to begin to see the possibility of the emancipatory reappropriation of aspects of the colonial library. The paper concludes by relating the foregoing discussion to the South African political studies classroom.

Introduction

Recent calls by South African university students for the decolonisation of university curricula have caused much consternation, uncertainty and bewilderment among many university academics, including myself. We find ourselves and our courses under very critical scrutiny from our students, some of whom insist that much of what they are being taught is expressive of a colonial mindset and, therefore, that we need to decolonise our curricula. Even where academics have not been resistant to this idea – and many have been – there has been much uncertainty about what decolonising the curricula entails. While I have felt no less unsettled than others by this robust contestation of university curricula, such calls are more familiar to me than they may be to many as my key area of teaching interest – African politics and, more generally, African Studies – has experienced decades of contestation. Critics of mainstream African Studies have challenged the dominance of white, Western scholars in the scholarly study of Africa; the approaches adopted by such scholars; and the content and preferred textbooks used in African Studies courses (see, for example, Mamdani 1998a, 1998b; Soyinka-Airewele and Edozie 2010; Zeleza 2006). As such, there is an already existing debate about curriculum transformation on which I have been able to draw when confronted by calls for the decolonisation of South African university curricula. In this paper, I relate some of the insights from these long-standing debates in African Studies to the current South African higher education context. In particular, I explore Mudimbe's (1988, 1991, 1994) concept of the 'colonial