Decolonizing the Philosophy
On the protests in South African universities

by Ernst Wolff

Behind the violent debates that have shaken up South African Universities, it is the whole legacy of colonialism and of the apartheid era that is at stake. This allows Ernst Wolff to question the status of contemporary African philosophy.

South African Universities: a pressurized environment

Seen as docile if not apolitical until then, South African students showed their political commitment since 2015—a commitment that has intensified in comparison to the beginning of the democratic era in 1994.[1] The question of university fees has taken center stage and mobilized students from virtually every university and of almost all political stripes. But much more than that is at stake. The demonstrations of 2015 are part of a growing rejection of the legacy of colonization and of apartheid. The explicit purpose of this movement is to "decolonize" and "transform" universities and academic research. The trigger for all the protests in 2015 was a demonstration against the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the most emblematic figure of 19th Century British imperialism, on the campus of the University of Cape Town.[2] As we will show below, the debates on academic philosophy in South Africa summarize the issues at stake in these protests.

During the protests, many journalists drew a comparison with the 1976 student—more specifically high school student—protests, which resulted in the deadly repression of the

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[1] See Tournadre, Jérôme, « Protester dans l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid », *Critique internationale* 39, 2008 and « Sur les bords de la protestation sociale. Illustrations sud-africaines », *Cultures & Conflits* 101, 2016.
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodes_Must_Fall

uprising in Soweto in June 1976[3]. The language used by the young generation today recalls the one used by their grandparents—that of the Black Consciousness movement.[4] But the two movements are very different: the social and political context has changed, the protesters are university and not high school students; some of them are "whites"[5], the mobilization has grown thanks to social networks, etc.

The protesters' central claim

In 2015, students demanded the abolition of tuition fees[6] (hence the name of the movement, "Fees must fall", which recalls the "Rhodes must fall" movement), then lowered their demands and asked for an unchanged fee in 2016 (as well as full employment for subcontractors). One of the stakes has been—as it has been elsewhere in the world[7]—the standard of living: becoming a part of the middle class is still a goal for many South Africans. But this issue is a bit different in South Africa. A large part of the population, mostly poor "blacks", face many difficulties when it comes to accessing university, while the reforms in tertiary education at the end of the 90's have considerably reduced the opportunities for vocational training outside university. Added to this is a very high level of unemployment (between 25% or 35%)[8] and one of the highest GINI coefficients in the world.[9] The state offers funding solutions with a loan system, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS),[10] which fuels the hope of a higher standard of living, but at the price of what is sometimes a lifetime debt.

The protesting students, though most of them are in a precarious situation, are paradoxically part of the bright side of the social situation. And the funds they are trying to attract are also intended to subsidize social grants, infrastructure, pension funds etc.—projects with which they are thus competing.

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[3] Lodge, Tom, « Resistance and reform, 1973-1994 », in Ross, Robert et. al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa* (vol 2). Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2012, p. 409-491.

[4] Gerhart, Gail, *Black power in South Africa. The evolution of an ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, chapitre 8 ; Pityana, N.B. et. al. (eds.) *Bounds of possibility: The legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1991 ; Mosibudi, Mangena, *On your own : evolution of Black Consciousness in South Africa/Azania*, Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1989.

[5] It is unfortunately very difficult to sketch out the South African context without resorting to what is usually referred to as "racial" categories. I will use those terms while regarding them as social constructions.

[6] http://businesstech.co.za/news/general/102010/what-you-need-to-know-about-university-fees-in-south-africa; http://www.pwc.co.za/en/higher-education/Funding-public-higher-education-institutions-SA.html

[7] See, for instance, Mamdani, Mahmood, « Between the public intellectual and the scholar: decolonization and some post-independence initiatives in African higher education », *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 17(1), 2016, p. 68–83

[8] Statistics SA, « Employment, unemployment, skills and economic growth », 2014.

[9] http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ZAF

[10] http://www.nsfas.org.za

In 2015, the students' claims were met as the tuition fees weren't raised, but this had foreseeable consequences. On the one hand, since the state provides only limited assistance to universities, the most economically fragile universities—those with the greatest number of poor students—were the ones who were, tragically, the most affected. On the other hand, a precedent was set, raising the question of what would happen in 2016. In September 2016, the Minister of Higher Education announced the new funding measures for 2017. The announcement was followed by strong negative reactions, which led to the temporary closure of most universities, and resulted in an increase of "racial" violence and polarization—a situation in contrast to what it was in 2015.[11]

However important the economic motives of these disputes may be, it would be wrong to disregard the broader "social struggle for recognition" that they echo—a struggle that is often evoked in order to amplify and broaden the demands of students. A slogan demanding "free and decolonized education" was broadly used in 2016.

The ideological background

These movements are only one aspect of a wider social struggle that aims at redefining the African university, a struggle that arose in a context of ideological dissent. Let's summarize the situation by introducing the two major paradigms.[12]

First, there is what we can call the Mandela paradigm.[13] In this paradigm, building on the conviction that the deadlock between the forces of the Apartheid State and the liberation forces was overcome by negotiations, the South African Constitution of 1996 is viewed as the expression of a moral victory. The institutions inherited from the old state are recognized, but so is the necessity to modify and supplement them with new institutions. The proponents of this paradigm are committed to the values of reconciliation and plurality, even though the logic of restorative justice involves an economic recovery policy ("Black economic empowerment") and a selective hiring policy ("affirmative action")—both of which follow the principle of "racial" differentiation.

On the other hand, we have the Biko[14] paradigm. Advocates of this perspective criticize the agreements the ANC and the former apartheid authorities negotiated in the early 1990's, viewing them as a continuation of the colonial violence, in the sense that they implicitly and

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[11] For a critical study of these measures, see. https://theconversation.com/free-education-is-possible-if-south-africa-moves-beyond-smoke-and-mirrors-65805

[12] I have already used this distinction in « Four questions on curriculum development in contemporary South Africa » (*South African Journal of Philosophy*, 35/4, 2016, pp. 444-459).

[13] For a more in-depth analysis of Mandela's thought, see Barnard, Rita (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Nelson Mandela*, New York: Cambridge U. P., 2014.

[14] Steve Biko (1946-1977), student leader, anti-apartheid activist and theorist of *Black Consciousness*. See Mangcu, Xolela, *Biko : a life*. London: Tauris, 2014.

illegitimately recognize the right of "whites" to take part in the construction of a country that was never theirs. In that view, the Constitution—the great object of pride in the Mandela paradigm—is, at best, only a temporary stage in the ongoing struggle for the liberation of the black Africans of Azania.[15] The institutions inherited from the old state, as well as the new Constitution, are both suspected of being a means of perpetuating inequalities between "racial" groups, and of maintaining white privilege, while signs of political influence or economic success among the "blacks" are interpreted as a smokescreen for the racist system. Notions such as "post-apartheid" or "non-racialism" are viewed as illegitimate ideological constructions. This paradigm, which has its roots in the Pan-Africanist and the Black Consciousness movements, has lost its importance during the Mandela years, and possibly during Mbeki's presidency, but it is regaining visibility and public influence nowadays.

Keeping in mind that those two paradigms are only trends, we can nevertheless highlight the importance of their differences by comparing two written reports on the state of Human and Social Sciences in South Africa in 2011. The first report, published by the Academy of Science of South Africa,[16] and based on the consensus principle, tends to support educational and research institutions in their current form—a form inherited from the Western model—, while identifying major problems and recommending reform measures as well as strengthened efforts in order to come to the rescue of these sciences. The second report, commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education leans more on the Biko side, and proposes alternative institutions and research programs that are Africanist or at least explicitly centered on Africa.[17]

These debates cannot be reduced to these two positions—being in favor or against one of those two paradigms—, as we will see if we turn to academic philosophy, a field in which tensions have considerably increased in the last two or three years. In addition to the subjects discussed in any other university throughout the world, for example funding problems, universities becoming businesses or corporations[18], questions related to the "decolonization of the mind" are always implicitly or explicitly present in the debates (including student demonstrations) taking place in South African Universities.

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[15] Azania is another name for South Africa. Thus, the legitimacy of "Coloureds" and "Asians" (according to South African categorizations) is also questioned.

[16] Academy of science of South Africa, *Consensus Study on the state of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, prospects and strategies*. Pretoria: Academy of Science of South Africa, 2011. (http://www.assaf.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/25-July-Final.pdf, accessed May 14th 2012).

[17] Higher Education and Training, *Report commissioned by the Minister of Higher Education & Training for the Charter for Humanities and Social Science*, 2011. (http://www.dhet.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Km17eOYeJgM%3D&tabid=92&mid=495, accessed 5 June 2012). See also Wolff, Ernst, « Reform and crises. Notes and questions on the condition of the Human and Social Sciences in South Africa and beyond », *Theoria* 60 (135), 2013, p. 62-82.

[18] Chetty, Nithaya & Merrett, Christopher, *The struggle for the soul of a South African University*, 2014.

The field of academic philosophy: a unique perspective on the ongoing debates

For several reasons, philosophy has become a strategic battlefield. Looking at the issues at stake in this university discipline will allow us to shed new light on the discussion. During the colonial era, the fact that Africans didn't (supposedly) have a philosophy of their own was used as an argument to support the idea of their inferiority (assuming that philosophy is one of the highest activities of human reason). As a response, the emergence of a written and academic African philosophy demonstrates both the excellence and the originality of African thought: a philosophy that is different from its Western counterpart, but not less legitimate a philosophy. Nowadays, it is recognized worldwide: there is an African philosophy as there is African music—but in a sense in which there are no African physics or African accounting. African philosophy also seeks to put specifically African concerns at the center of its reflections. That is why its place in the university curriculum raises sensitive issues revolving around the recognition of the humanity of Africans, and the worth of their cultural legacies. In other words, the exclusion of students from the curriculum owing to cultural reasons, echoes the exclusion of many students from higher education due to economic reasons.

For a reader unfamiliar with the discussions on African philosophy, we'll recall the range of strategies used in the last seven decades or so to advocate the existence of an African philosophy and the legitimacy of its place within academia.[19] The idea that there is an implicit philosophy in the cultural expressions of the people of Africa is still widespread. This perspective, initially promoted mainly by religious thinkers such as Tempels, Kagame, or Mbiti, echoes the movement of Negritude, especially in its Senghorian version. But these "ethno-philosophical" approaches have since been sharply criticized by philosophers such as Eboussi-Boulaga, Hountondji, Okere and Towa, who support the idea that philosophy is a specific subject, not to be confused with the surrounding culture.

Between those two poles, some thinkers such as Wiredu, Gyekye, Okonda and Oruka, have opened a middle way by recognizing the singularity of African philosophy as an academic discipline (as opposed to the surrounding culture) while investigating its roots in African traditions and tongues. Other researchers, such as Anta Diop or Obenga try to obtain the recognition of the greatness of the African spirit by showing that the culture of Ancient Egypt is rooted in African culture. The influence of political thinkers of the era of decolonization (and after) such as Fanon, Nyerere, Cabral, Kaunda and Nkrumah extended well beyond the limits of academia. More recently, Appiah, Mudimbe, Mamdani and Mbembe have developed more interdisciplinary approaches, related to the field of postcolonial studies and even to postmodernism. It is also necessary to mention the many other influences that contributed to

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[19] [19] Cf. Mudimbe, V.Y. *The invention of Africa. Gnosis, philosophy and the order or knowledge.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 1988, Hallen, Barry, *A short history of African philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009 et Kodjo-Grandvaux, Séverine, *Philosophies africaines*, Présence africaine, 2013.

shape a wide range of theories: African American or Afro-Caribbean writers such as Blyden, Du Bois, James, Gordon, or religious thinkers, especially of Islam or of Christianity.

Despite some rather remarkable differences between these approaches, there is widespread agreement that there is an African philosophy. Its existence can no longer be denied, as shows the voluminous literature defending and putting this philosophy into practice.[20] Why, then, is there an ongoing predominance of Western philosophy even in Africa, where it seems to add a further injustice to the existing social inequalities? Isn't it time to give African philosophy its due place—beyond what is already being done—in African education? [21] Shouldn't we simply accept that African philosophy has the right to exist in universities on the continent where it was born, as the Africans do—and that it is Western philosophy that should justify its presence in a foreign land?[22] Let us then examine this thorny subject.

If we accept the default priority of African philosophy, which includes the structuring function Western philosophies used to have in African universities, what are the issues as far as the decolonization of philosophy is concerned?

What role should the Western legacy play?

Let's inverse the traditional relation of legitimacy and ask how Western philosophy can justify and recommend its place in South African universities. A way of answering this question would be to signal the fact that many supporters of African philosophy have been influenced by and usually have a (partially) constructive relationship with different versions of Western philosophy. As long as Western philosophies are being taught in African universities, and constitute a field of research, they are part of the academic landscape and of the training of African philosophers.

Moreover, it is impossible to criticize the devastating effects that Western thought has had on Africa—critique rightly practiced by postcolonial studies—without having a good knowledge of the history of Western philosophy.

As for the areas of philosophy that have yet to be fully developed by African thinkers—philosophy of science or philosophy of technology, for instance—, we can imagine that borrowing theories from Western texts could be a constructive process, and this all the more

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[20] See A. J. Smet, « African Philosophical Bibliography»
 http://www.isp.ucl.ac.be/recherche/philafr/A.html
[21] Okeja, Uchenna. « Space contestations and the teaching of African Philosophy in African Universities», *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31(4), 2012, p. 664–675.
[22] I explored that point of view in Wolff (2016) and draw henceforth from that publication.

since the African world is partly structured by scientific, economic and political developments inherited predominantly from the Western world.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that Westerners share many concerns with Africans, on topics such as the environmental crisis, the problems related to responsibility in politics, the suffering imposed on the poor by capitalism, the fate of defenceless minorities, etc. The existence of certain overlaps, despite obvious differences, cannot be denied.

What conclusion should we draw after examining these arguments? On the one hand, these arguments are strong enough to hesitate about all calls to simply eliminate Western philosophy from African universities. On the other hand, they are weak enough to highlight the fact that the rise of African philosophy successfully challenges the presumed unshakable place of Western philosophy. We must then recognize that these arguments are not strong enough to prevent us from giving a dominant position to African philosophy in our reflections on education programs.

Decolonization: how to deal with ambiguity

The above considerations have provided us with an insight into the relative autonomy of African philosophy, but they haven't exposed what may be called the ambiguity of most of the theories aiming at "decolonizing the mind".[23] This ambiguity can be seen in the use of language: most authors build strong arguments against the imposition of colonial languages while writing in English or in French. The mobilization for "decolonizing the university" holds the same kind of ambiguity, as there is no talking of abolishing the university—a colonial legacy—, but only of transforming its nature. And here too, the very structure of the arguments in favor of the decolonization of the university is ambiguous, since university courses, scientific articles, PhD programs and symposiums were all born in the Western world and bear the marks of their origin. In that way, what is seldom explicitly said is nevertheless *de facto* admitted: the colonial heritage can be turned against itself and is, in that sense, an ambiguous legacy. The question is then: is Western philosophy ambiguous enough to be used to criticize its own past— which would justify Africans to keep practicing it?

In order to see how important that question is we should mention the fact that Western philosophy has been serving discriminatory institutions and/or prejudices for a long time, and that it still does. It would be pointless to pretend that this aspect of Western philosophy is a mere accident due to the writings of the less skilled thinkers, since the racism in the work of philosophers such as Hume, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel and other great figures of the Enlightenment

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[23] Cf. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind. The politics of language in African literature*. London & Nairobi: James Currey & Heinemann, 1986 and Wiredu, Kwasi « Toward decolonizing African philosophy and religion », *African Studies Quarterly* 1(4), 1998, p. 17-46.

is now well known.[24] And it is not as though the European philosophical establishment as a whole had condemned colonization …[25] Therefore we can understand that some go so far as to wonder whether Western philosophy contains blind spots that make it an instrument of violence—even without the knowledge of its practitioners.

What the new generation of critics of society and even of philosophers often seems to ignore is that before 1994, some South African academics—such as Versfeld (a neo-Thomist), Turner (a neo-Marxist existentialist) or Snyman (a specialist of the Frankfurt School)—made use of their training and of their research in Western philosophy in order to explicitly criticize the injustices of apartheid.[26] The ambiguity of such authors cannot be denied, but an adamant critic could always reproach them for having been advantaged bythe system of apartheid as "whites". It is therefore necessary to investigate very explicitly how "black" authors—whose point of view is not suspect of being biased in the present debate— have interpreted Western philosophy.

Therefore, it is not trivial to note that authors such as Lembede (from the point of view of Africanism and of philosophy of religion), Biko (through Black Consciousness), Manganyi (through psychology) or More (through "black existentialism") have furtively or systematically acknowledged the value of Western philosophy, either as an element of their training in Human and Social Sciences, or as a source of insightful concepts, or for its socio-critical contributions.

Understanding "relevance"

Every philosophy lecturer must sooner or later face the important question of the relevance of his or her subject. In general, the validity of philosophy can be testified by its practical applications. In South Africa a new criterion is added to test the merits of philosophy: that of the level of "transformation" (a rather vague term widely used to refer to the progressive elimination of institutionalized injustices dating from the Apartheid era) or "Africanization" reflected in a theory. A Western visitor would be struck by the way the Western social sciences can sometimes be deprecated in general, and in an uncompromising way. The search for an in-depth decolonization can explain this phenomenon. But if the intellectual climate makes it relatively easy to express this rejection of Western social sciences, it is much harder to describe what "relevance" means. There are two types of arguments.

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[24] See Eze, Emmanuel C., *Race and the Enlightenment: a Reader*, Cambridge : Blackwell, 1997.

[25] Marcel Merle, « L'anticolonialisme », in Marc Ferro (ed.) *Le livre noir du colonialisme. XVIe – XXIe siècle : de l'extermination à la repentance*. Paris : Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2010, p. 815-862.

[26] See Marthinus Versfeld, *Oor gode en afgode*. Pretoria : Protea, [1948]2010, Richard Turner, « The relevance of contemporary radical thought », in: Randall, P. (ed.). *Directions of change in South African politics*. Johannesburg : SPRO-CAS, 1971, p. 73-85 and Johan Snyman, *Theodor W. Adorno: Kritiek en utopie*. PhD dissertation in philosophy, RAU [now UJ] : Johannesburg, 1985.

On the one hand one may deny all relevance to the Western heritage as a whole (and it is often implied that the African cultural heritage is as a whole relevant). One of the dangers of this theoretical position is that it can lead to a cultural dichotomy extremely similar to the division once promoted by the apartheid ideologues. In my experience, many South African critics of society are still unaware of these harmful similarities. Others—such as the promoters of the Black Consciousness, to whom I turn in the next section—take this view from a perspective that Spivak called "strategic essentialism".

On the other hand, any alternative to this first option involves recognizing that every cultural heritage is ambiguous. No tradition can be passed on to students on the assumption that the tradition itself guarantees the relevance of its legacy. Under this perspective, there is no reason to embrace or to reject a tradition, whether African or Western, in the name of its *a priori* relevance (or lack thereof). We must then decipher, interpret and criticize our ambiguous traditions in order to identify and select the elements that can shed light on our existence, our worries, and our joys. This quest is open-ended. But the current confrontational atmosphere tends to narrow down open debate.

Who may legitimately speak?

There is another thorn in the flesh of the university—a radical and difficult question: who may legitimately take part in these debates? In order to clarify this point, it is necessary to take another look at the two ideological paradigms mentioned above.

The Mandela paradigm is based on the belief that South Africa belongs to all its citizens equally (according to the Freedom Charter adopted by the ANC in 1955 and confirmed in the 1996 Constitution) whereas the Biko paradigm tends to divide the population into two groups: those who are fully legitimate members of the South African society, and those who can only be tolerated under conditions set by the former. The increasing importance of this last point of view in the public space may surprise a foreign observer, who may fear some kind of essentialism, nativism or even racism very similar to the ideas advocated by the far-right in Europe. And it is true that these temptations are never far away. But this doesn't take away the central fact that the problem of racism still remains everywhere in the world, and that in South Africa as elsewhere, institutions, the economy and the surrounding culture are still too often biased against people of African descent. And in that sense, this point of view is very different from the one of the European far-right. In this perspective, the agreement negotiated in South Africa in the 1990's is viewed as the result of historically rooted violence, which gives the descendants of Europeans an illegitimate place—a place they have usurped over centuries of abuse. For this reason, some citizens see the persistence of "white" professors, already privileged in a Eurocentrist education system, and whose cultural preferences influence the study programs, as offensive. And if the entire history that has produced a group of still

predominantly "white" university professors is illegitimate, then the participation of these professors in the debates, as well as their teaching, can be declared null and void.

This explains a surprising feature of the South African philosophical and intellectual landscape: the fact that the opinion of many people hired by the state for their competence is very frequently discarded or mistrusted. While this social fact is easy to observe, it is more difficult to foresee which position between the two presented here will prevail in the future.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw conclusions on an ongoing process and to take a stand in unfinished debates. Nevertheless, a few points could be made.

Firstly, for the time being the struggles to conquer universities take place in a democratic context that regulates them, and which they feed in turn. At the same time, experimenting with what a democracy can facilitate and tolerate means taking the risk of being at odds with the spirit of democracy.

Secondly, the protests (even when they involve vandalism)[27] and the questioning of study programs and lecturers have always confirmed the existence of the university as institution in South Africa. However, a wave of reforms is to be expected, and no one knows its outcome yet.

Thirdly, the fact that this institution—a colonial heritage—is maintained will have to involve a grieving process: people will have to recognize that history cannot be reversed, and that the ambition of a complete decolonization cannot fully be met. The future, however, is still to be written. The creativity and diversity of human beings (even within a single "ethnic"[28] group), however difficult and risky the use thereof may be, remain a possible avenue to continued liberation. If the student movements run the risk of becoming conservative, they mostly have the potential to stimulate reflection on the thorny issues addressed in this article and for which university philosophy has served as a case study.

Fourthly, innovation always takes place in a national and international framework, and this involves considerable constraints. If students don't open their eyes to the fact that with their (fully valid) struggle, they are competing for limited resources with other sectors of society, they will have to face serious problems of inequality and injustice once they have entered their professional life as elites—problems that they will have aggravated without knowing it. In South

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[27] https://africacheck.org/how-to-fact-check/factsheets-and-guides/factsheet-how-much-did-damage-due-to-student-protests-cost-sa-universities/

[28] Cf. Taiwò, Olúfémi, *How colonialism pre-empted modernity in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 2010.

Africa as elsewhere, low economic growth must force us to reconsider the distribution of national wealth.

Fifthly, it would be blind not to recognize the historical significance of the students' claims as far as global inequalities are concerned. We may—rightly—want to remove any reference to the color of skin, or to the continent of origin of certain people, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that the international systems which distribute symbolic, economic and political privileges are still too often discriminatory.[29]

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