

Decolonising Collective Leiden Symposium

Background

The Decolonising Knowledge Symposium was held on [3 March 2021](#) with 175 participants. Three principal questions guided the discussions:

- 1) What are the challenges and prospects of decolonising knowledge production given our colonialist context here at Leiden/The Netherlands/Europe?
- 2) How can we decolonise our research process in a rigorous and sustained manner, and not as a performative gesture?
- 3) What concrete steps and approaches can we take to decolonise our pedagogy/teaching?

The opening session included presentations by Karen Smith (International Relations), Tana Joseph and Pedro Russo (Astronomy), Francio Guadeloupe and Dastan Abdali (Anthropology), Maria Gabriela Palacio Ludeña (Development Studies), and Karwan-Fatah Black (History). In the second session the participants were distributed into 8 breakout groups. In the closing session, participants gathered in a plenary to share their key points and discuss ways forward for the Decolonising Collective. This report is a compilation of the summaries from the breakout groups.

Report on breakout group discussions

Perhaps a most uncontroversial claim – even if it remains to be empirically substantiated – would be that there is a conspicuous absence of discussions on decolonising knowledge in most Dutch Universities, in particular at Leiden University. A key point raised across several breakout groups was that the celebration of Dutch Liberalism, of the Netherlands being a tolerant and open society, often becomes either a convenient excuse not to discuss at all topics that raise uncomfortable questions about the Dutch colonial past and present, or a false nod to consensus-making by strongly underplaying questions about the colonial context and character of Dutch society. As one participant observed, racial minorities and their perspectives are always called upon to live up to the promise of ‘assimilation’ through sublimation of their identity claims. The pressure that surrounds the process of ‘assimilation’ in The Netherlands is really strong.

Challenges and prospects of decolonising knowledge production in Leiden

Within Leiden University, this sense of alienation faced by scholars working on decolonisation or from minority groups is acute. There is, another participant noted, a missionary zeal to how Leiden University views itself. Given the University’s history, it self-identifies as a ‘bastion of freedom’ and declares its commitment to ‘inclusiveness and diversity’. However, compared to some of the other Universities in the region, several participants relayed their experience that the opposition, if not hostility, to efforts at decolonising knowledge production is markedly greater at

Leiden. The general resistance to decolonisation is often accompanied and bolstered by ignorance about what decolonising can entail.

Although issues of diversity are often linked with issues of decolonising knowledge, decolonising the university goes beyond diversity. Diversity perspectives raise pertinent issues related to, albeit not limited to, questions of representation. Quite evidently, even on the issues of diversity, the University is yet to have wide conversations – although colleagues across the University are engaged in raising the issue. However, decolonising the university is also about epistemological diversity and decolonising knowledge production and dissemination, something that remains occluded. The teaching, research and hiring practices at Leiden University are underscored by an epistemological homogeneity, even if we have now started considering diversity in representation. The two are necessarily linked, and hence efforts aimed at epistemological as well as representational plurality need greater collaboration across the University.

Decolonising research and pedagogy

The binaries of western knowledge and non-western knowledge are unhelpful frames of reference in order to substantively transform how we can think about decolonisation. As much as decolonisation involves mainstreaming systems of knowledge that could be geographically located outside of, what is traditionally considered, ‘the West’, it is as much about problematising the claim that western knowledge is entirely western. Western knowledge has been formed in entanglements with the non-west, through exploitation, appropriation, inspiration, or co-constitution. Decolonisation implies reclaiming multivocality and pluriversality of knowledge production.

In this regard, several participants noted that our research practices – in terms of kinds of questions that are asked, the methodologies that are prioritised, and indeed the final ‘consumer’ of this research – remained thoroughly Eurocentric. Funding agencies within the University support these practices: for instance, a proposal that prioritises the needs of the community rather than an instrumentalised, ‘objective’, research question(s) would rarely qualify for funding. Further, the ‘non-west’ is understood, analysed and researched only in terms of what are understood to be ‘universal’ (read: western) epistemological frames.

Even within sympathetic circles, decolonisation remains a performative academic gesture. In most cases, it rarely travels from conference venues to classrooms, i.e. our course syllabi are thoroughly and blatantly Eurocentric. Even where decolonial approaches are taught within the University, they are hived off into silos as specialised electives. The core courses across faculties are almost entirely populated by approaches that privilege the usual white, western, male scholar. It is important, as one participant said, to localize grand narratives – cut them to their normal size, place them in their context, and that can only happen when they do not occupy extra space on our course curricula. The localisation of the mainstream and the mainstreaming of the local/provincial requires a process that goes beyond ‘add and stir’ approach – one that adds a few non-western authors writing in English into the course curricula. It requires creatively rethinking how we design our courses as well as our pedagogy, and including the ‘stakeholders’ – students and as well the communities – in co-thinking the values that guide our teaching.

If it is difficult to bring decolonisation into the classrooms, it is rarer to take it out into the streets. Our approaches to decolonisation are directed at, but also complicit in the reproduction of, the Ivory Tower, and rarely bring non-academic and/or activist communities into conversation. Non-academic colleagues and sources are deprivileged in our teaching even though they strongly inform our research. Decolonising perspectives enjoin us to look outside the university to diversify knowledge. Participants emphasised using non-scholarly research, recognising the role of non-academic activism and centering indigenous research practices as key towards any substantive change. Even in our research, as several participants pointed out, the researcher-researched binary is maintained. The research question/s that guide/s the study is framed by the researcher and the researched are merely informants. The latter are never the ones who get to ask the questions that are important to them. Indeed, rarely do we question how our research is embedded in the relevant communities.

Finally, the politics of language is key to any strategy for decolonising knowledge production and consumption. Although the necessities of communication require the use of a common language in teaching (English mostly in the case of academia), as one participant observed, this does not preclude encouraging students to utilise/draw on/investigate non-English sources in their research. Another participant noted the importance of digitisation and technology in democratising access to knowledge (to data, resources, conferences etc.), although considerable challenges remain in terms of bridging the digital divide.

Building a Decolonising Collective Leiden

Substantive transformation in our practices requires commitment to change in our institutional and individual practices. A first step, as to everything else, is acknowledging that colonial/racial practices continue to inform our practices on all of these parameters and practices. In that effort, the Decolonising Collective Leiden will aim to foster conversations and raise University-wide awareness around issues of decolonising knowledge at Leiden University. These conversations will, however, also need to identify specific issue-areas which require initiative. Our conversations must seek out ways to productively leverage the opportunities that are afforded to widen the space for decolonisation. Decolonisation, as one participant bluntly put, doesn't come cheap. When institutional cultures with regard to knowledge production and consumption are almost entirely helmed by and functionally sustained (for white audiences), how far is it useful to talk decolonisation without discussing the sacrifices people will have to make? Institutions do not change overnight. A key challenge for all of us is to productively think of building cultures of solidarity. In this regard, several participants emphasised the importance of 'interdisciplinary friendships'. We need to seek out colleagues and allies across faculties and disciplines and from our alumni, build solidarities, share knowledge, learn from best practices and strategies adopted by academic and non-academic staff and students, and amplify each other's voices.

As much as furthering a decolonisation agenda necessitates questioning the explicit and implicit hierarchies, it also requires reclaiming a space for struggle. A profession that is being aggressively fastened into a neoliberal space, one that treats students as customers and the staff as service providers, both locked in a transactional relationship sustained by precarity, needs new solidarities of struggle. This is not separate from the issue of decolonisation. The neoliberalisation

of higher education works through logics of racial capitalism, and decolonising the University is necessarily about facilitating and claiming a space that values non-hierarchical, non-transactional, intuitive dialogue. Decolonisation also means placing knowledge creation above commercial interest and is informed by a vision of justice that has a life beyond statistical numbers.

Future Steps of the Decolonising Collective

The Decolonising Collective aims to foster a community of solidarity jointly focused on decolonising knowledge at Leiden University by raising the consciousness of its members and changing practices. The organising committee (listed below) aims to host events once a semester in direct collaboration with its membership that are open to all staff and students of Leiden University and associated institutions e.g. Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and Museum Volkenkunde. To support its objectives, the Decolonising Collective will take the following immediate steps:

- Foster conversations about decolonising knowledge production in Leiden through formal and informal gatherings
- Involve potential members in shaping the Decolonising Collective
- Promote the Decolonising Collective to increase membership and member involvement
- Organise a second community-wide event led by members of the Collective (semester 1 of 2021-2022)
- Start a mailing list and invite the community to sign up and/or submit information to share with the rest of the collective
- Establish a webpage to ensure a central place for communication

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