

### ***Book Review***

Jansen, J.D. and Walters, C.A. 2022. *The Decolonization of Knowledge: Radical Ideas and the Shaping of Institutions in South Africa and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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This book should be read by every academic. Why make that statement when the advent of generative AI seems a far more existential threat, and the call for decolonisation is almost a decade old? Full disclosure: I appear in the book – I am one of the case studies. What I learnt in reading this book is the level of my own naivete about how the system of higher education can change. It offers a sobering portrait of the reality of academic freedom.

The authors follow three important threads which operate at different levels of influence:

- 1) The hastily drawn up documents by each institution,
- 2) The dissonance between CHE, SAQA, DHET and the accreditation bodies of professional degrees, and
- 3) The whole-hearted, well-intentioned responses of individual academics.

There is a gap now of five years between the conduction of this research and the publication of this book, and still very little has actually changed on the ground. To the authors this comes as no surprise as the three threads are not at aligned.

When I read the accounts of the academics, all of whom are trying to respond in their own contexts in particular ways, my heart is warmed. Each is well intentioned, creative, and works within their spheres to leverage change. Some are thwarted before they have had an impact, maybe because they were deemed too radical; others can coerce alignment because they already occupy positions of authority and have real agency.

I cannot help but turn to Margaret Archer and her notions of structure and agency. Before reading this book, I had a notion of academic agency that believed in the power of the individual to effect change: if we could just create the right argument and write that beautiful academic paper, then we will be able to get others to follow. I did not factor in the level of CHE/SAQA/DHET. There is a world of bureaucratic machinations that are designed (intentionally or not) to slow change. At a national level, the structure's purpose is to sustain the existing structure.

At an institutional level – it appears that survival kicked in – documents were produced to mollify the protestors whilst keeping the ship afloat. The responses are pragmatic and situational. In the words of Innocent Phikirayi – an archaeologist at the University of Pretoria who was one of the case studies - "It was a reaction to the political circumstances to say "how best should we be seen to respond" rather than to say "how should we respond robustly to the challenge since



we have been caught napping?" (156) Once a policy document was drawn up it was very much left to individual academics to enact.

Two chapters are devoted to the stories of academics. One focusing on arts and social sciences and one on STEM fields. It is fascinating to me that across the board the authors trace the orientation and inclination to engage meaningfully in decolonisation efforts to life events which were in place before the protests. And indeed most were already enacting some of the changes which are now labelled as 'decolonisation' prior to the 2015/2016 protests. The main difference between the two groups of academics is their orientation to the work. For the social scientists the authors remark 'Each had had an intellectual journey which had transformed their own thinking about the politics of knowledge' (169). For the STEM academics the authors note that the respondents share a sensitivity, patience, and understanding. The strategy taken is one of intellectual persuasion rather than political confrontation.

In reading the case studies, the element which is mentioned frequently is assessment. The notion of testing this individual's capacity to recall information in closed book timed exam is inextricably linked with Western individualism. It is curious to me to observe that of the hundreds if not thousands of papers that have been written on decolonisation across South Africa only a handful deal with assessment in any kind of meaningful way. As long as our assessment practices remain unchanged, it doesn't matter what we teach in the curriculum; we have not yet begun to scratch the surface of decolonisation.

This book should be recommended reading for incoming academics, because it is a case study in power. Returning to Archer's nexus of structure and agency, what strikes me is that the policy documents of the universities look like they provide the structure which will enable the agency of individual academics and indeed in my experience it did give me license to explore intellectual spaces which would have been deemed detrimental to my career had the policy document not been in place. And so individual agency was given, but this was not met by structural will to change. The structure remained and remains self-preserving.

*Reviewed by*

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