Conference Report:

Decolonizing Curricula, Pluralizing Teaching and Research – Postcolonial Perspectives on Universities in the 21st Century

2–4 February 2023, ETH Zurich

Organised by: Monique Ligtenberg and Harald Fischer-Tiné (History of the Modern World, ETH Zurich), Philipp Krauer (Staatsarchiv Schwyz)

Report by: Esperanza Anido Calvo, University of Vechta

This year's international conference organised by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ, 2–4 February 2023) focused on discussions around decolonising academic institutions, rooted within a wider tradition of socio-political endeavours propelled by the *Rhodes Must Fall* movement in 2015. Having been held in Switzerland, a state with officially no former colonies, the conference added a distinct point of view to this ongoing topic. As both academia and colonialist ties, however, transcend national boundaries, "Decolonizing Curricula" attempted to dismantle persisting patterns of hierarchisation of knowledge, Eurocentric and racist bias in literary canons and curricula, and monocultural compositions of faculties by addressing pressing questions and proposing solution-oriented answers. The report hereafter focuses on the key concepts, approaches, and discussions that shaped the comprehensive three-day conference.

ANNE KWASCHIK (Konstanz, Germany) opened the conference with a discussion of the "colonial moment" of sciences: institutionalised from the 1890s onwards, the social sciences developed early on new perspectives on culture and science by exploring both a colonialist body of thought as well as the "social questions" of the time. In this sense, both scientific and colonial administrative knowledge were not strictly separated from one another but merged into the so-called "colonial sciences", which strongly shaped disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, thus mirroring colonial and scientific entanglements at the end of the 19th century.

Similarly, SERGE REUBI (Aubervilliers, France) took the "sciences coloniales" as a starting point for his endeavour to historicise colonial complicities in science and technology, examined through the work of the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule. Griaule's aerial photographs of Cameroon, as part of his "Sahara–Cameroun" expedition, reflect the colonial implications of the very instruments and resources (e.g. military airplanes) enabling his "scientific" work: mapping the indigenous peoples and their land. Other missions within a colonial context, such as "la Mission scientifique suisse en Angola",

further served trading, taking products to Angola for advertisement and selling (e.g. *Ovomaltine* cacao bottles), and bringing back medical samples to Swiss enterprises (e.g. to *La Roche*).

Such entanglements of economics, science, and colonialism are also mirrored in **TOMÁS BARTO-LETTI**'s (Florence, Italy) examination of Economic Entomology, a discipline that not only reflects a national narrative about science but also how scientific actors circulated in colonial (and independent) spaces at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Entomology, therefore, emerged as a discipline concentrating on the whole economic enterprise in the different plantations visited since the focus was not only on the insects and plants that were brought back to actors and institutions for the purpose of being collected and studied, but also on the profit that could be generated.

In a similar fashion, botanical gardens, too, reflect entanglements of science and colonialism, as **MONA BIELING** (Munich, Germany) showed in the context of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Established in 1931 by two Jewish botanists, the botanical garden nurtured asymmetrical power relations: on the one hand, it established itself as a solely Jewish space (detached from the British Empire) and, thus, served nation building, on the other hand, it set itself apart from the Palestinian population by banning local Arabs (and their knowledge) from entering the botanical space, and in doing so, reproduced colonial thinking and acting patterns under the guise of science.

A highlight of the thematisation of science and colonialism was **SUMAN SETH**'s (Ithaca, USA) keynote lecture on indigenous and postcolonial science and technology studies, in which he presented the problem of ontological departure. Seth elucidated that instead of merely adopting epistemologically relativist positions on competing "beliefs" about the world, whereby it is accepted that only one world exists – however many understandings of that world there may be – we could question the existence of only one ontology altogether, as the problem may lie in the assumption that "we" all share one single universe and not, as some have argued, a pluriverse. With regards to the "post" in postcolonial science, the prevalent perception is that colonialism as a system has not ended but persists in a different, refigured form. In this sense, the postcolonial *present* indicates contemporary phenomena in need of new modes of analysis and critique. One such mode, explored by Seth, is a plurality of postcolonial histories of colonialism and colonial sciences, leading to debates on different views on ontology, while taking into consideration indigenous perspectives.

The question, then, arises as to the aim of such debates concerning a pluralisation of (postcolonial) voices: Is the decolonisation project merely one of adding "perspectives", or does it demand a new conceptualisation of the discipline of history altogether? One act of decolonising beyond the mere diagnostic, then, would be to radically rethink modes of history production and normalise new ways of writing and language use overall, as put forward during the conference discussions. The challenge of unpacking tropes repeatedly used in scientific discourse as well as in mass culture more generally is also mirrored in the humanitarian sector and the debate around the term "aid": the proposition to adopt other, more apposite descriptions, as introduced during the presentations by the **STUDENTS OF THE MAS DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION** master curriculum (Zurich, Switzerland), such as

"retribution", or, simply, "fair global policies", is an important one as it confronts racist language and deep-rooted thinking patterns in society (such as "white saviourism").

The role of museums and archives in this matter was not left unmentioned either. Modes of (re)presenting colonial collections reproducing (possibly racist) Eurocentric epistemologies, as MONIQUE LIGTENBERG (Zurich, Switzerland) explained, should be revoked, too. The problem herein lies not only in the lack of research on the circumstances of such collecting practices and, as a result, of how epistemic knowledge comes to be formed, but also in the lack of research on provenance of collections in Swiss museums more generally. Some of the solution-oriented approaches proposed by Ligtenberg could be the establishment of (globally accessible) databases with detailed lists of colonial collections as well as an exchange of (historical) knowledge via new channels beyond a merely academic discourse.

Along similar lines, the decolonisation of the archive, as presented by STEPHANIE WILLI (ETH Archive, Switzerland) and PHILIPP KRAUER (Staatsarchiv Schwyz, Switzerland) was also discussed. At the centre of archival work, we find the key tasks of collecting, storing, and selecting documents and objects to be kept. Still at the centre, however, we also find power: the power to retain, reject, and, to a certain degree, shape the practice of remembering. In this way, archives (similar to museums) possess the ability to create and perpetuate forms of hegemonic power. To counter this risk, not only transnational networking with other archives and institutions, but also the disclosure of knowledge production was suggested, bearing in mind that archives, too, are not mere colonial remnants but have an important democratic function.

Encapsulating the sentiment of the time and moving beyond suggestions on digitisation, disclosure of provenance, and accessibility, MAREILE FLITSCH (Ethnographic Museum Zurich, Switzerland) rightly noted that current issues in all ethnographic museums furthermore concern ownership, heritage declaration, and restitution. The repatriation of the Benin Bronzes is only one example: not only objects but also knowledge need to rightfully be ascribed. In order to counter the status quo, thus, the multi-perspectivity and plurality in and of arts need to be acknowledged through a process of what ANNETTE BHAGWATI (Rietberg Museum Zurich, Switzerland) introduced as "provincialising" art history: understanding that Western knowledge and art are only one of many traditions and perspectives. In VITJITUA NDJIHARINE's (Dekoloniale Berlin, Germany) point of view, in rethinking the role of museums, we could strive for a "post-museum", which not only belongs to curators and scientists, but also to students, artists, and the general populace.

Another concept aimed at achieving such a multi-perspectivity brought into perspective during her keynote lecture was what CLÉMENTINE DELISS (KWI Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin, Germany) termed "academic iconoclasm", i.e. countering possibly biased approaches to the study of entities by bringing several objects simultaneously into the focus and thus putting them into dialogue with each other. Having different panellists with different backgrounds necessarily implied differing, and also clashing, stances: the idea of the implementation of more inclusive curatorial strategies aimed at restructuring ethnographic museums was simultaneously expressed alongside that of abolishing

them altogether. More generally, throughout the conference, there was an ongoing process of linguistic negotiation of the terminologies used: "post-colonialism" was juxtaposed with "anti-colonialism", "decolonising" with (indigenous) "perspectivism", (racialised) "space" with "diversity".

In response to an exchange of complex (and multi-layered) concepts and terminologies, as in the case of the conference's key term "decolonise", where mutual understanding and therefore action may be compromised, language in itself runs the risk of being reduced to mere *tokenism*, as DEBJANI BHATTACHARYYA (Zurich, Switzerland) expounded with regard to the term diversity. It becomes evident that in light of the concepts of "racialised spaces" and "politics of stranger making", as Bhattacharyya concluded, we do need diversity practices: focusing on actual material and political means and their implementation (e.g. concrete funding), instead of linguistic "cosmetic correction", such diversity practices can oppose the construction of what DANIELLE ISLER (Bayreuth, Germany) presented as the "spatial exclusion" of certain peoples. This can be achieved through different forms of (activist) student performance, through work with non-academics and the inclusion of their voices and knowledge, and through activism on behalf of scholars and researchers, as accentuated by SHOSE KESSI (Cape Town, South Africa). Another proposal was the familiarisation with concepts of anarchism as the "synthesis" of Marxism and Postcolonialism, as ROBERT KRAMM (Munich, Germany) put forward, as anarchist thought constantly questions its own positionality and criticises authority and power relations. These approaches and actions should moreover be accompanied by a concurrent process of "un-learning": in order to affront new challenges and engage in dialogue with open-mindedness, we must learn to (selectively) un-learn and reflect on our own stance, thereby equally valuing and embracing both academic expertise as well as life experience, as exemplified by MUNIR FASHEH (Arab Education Forum, West Bank).

In the last roundtable of the conference, we moved to a discussion of decolonisation outside of academia. The necessity for a pluralising of post- and anti-colonial debates, as noted by CORINE MAUCH (City mayor of Zurich, Switzerland), was mutually agreed on, whereby both Switzerland and Germany must reflect on themselves as post-migratory societies. Reciprocal transformative engagement between different cultures and their approaches to knowledge, bearing in mind different forms of power and still existing hierarchisation, as JOVITA DOS SANTOS PINTO (Bern, Switzerland) pointed out, would go hand in hand with the process of "re-linking", hopefully resulting in an effective dialogue across society. Naturally, in this round, too, the term "decolonise" was discussed, especially with regard to its potentially radical character: A certain radicalism, as GEORG KREIS (Basel, Switzerland) put forward, was deemed necessary in order to bring about a real-life change that goes beyond the spoken and imagined realm, particularly in light of internalised notions of xenophobia and racism. It is important to advert to the necessity of moving away from a simplified white-black dichotomy, a way of thinking heavily influenced by and imported from US-American discourses, which can itself reproduce racialised and racist views and only picks up on a reduced aspect (mostly limiting itself to something as superficial as skin colour) of a wider, more complex and deep-seated matter. Rather, as proposed by an auditor, we should speak of racism(s), bearing in mind how racist

structures are not dissociated from one another, neither in space nor in time, manifesting what **HAN-NAN SALAMAT** (Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog, Switzerland) called a "multidirectional culture of remembering". Against this background and related to the initial question, we conclude with **DEMBAH FOFANAH**'s (VoDa., Switzerland) asseveration that a concurrent dialogue between universities, institutions, activists, and other agents seems to be a productive way to purposefully drive the decolonising process exactly there and then, where racist structures have their full effect.

Esperanza Anido Calvo

Conference Overview:

Historical Perspectives – Colonial Entanglements across Regions and Disciplines
Welcome and introduction: Monique Ligtenberg, Philipp Krauer & Harald Fischer-Tiné

Panel 1:
Moderation: Martin Dusinberre (University of Zurich)

Anne Kwaschik (University of Konstanz): The 'Colonial Moment' in the History of Sociologies

Monique Ligtenberg (ETH Zurich): Of Tigers and Men: Colonial Collecting and the Swiss Bourgeoisie

Serge Reubi (Centre Alexandre-Koyré, Aubervilliers): Producing Knowledge and Imposing Norms: the Shared Practices, Actors and Institutions of Sciences and Empires

Panel 2:
Moderation: Gesine Krüger (University of Zurich)

Mona Bieling (Rachel Carson Centre, LMU Munich): Hebrew University Jerusalem's Botanical Garden and its Colonial Entanglements (1920s-1940s)

Tomás Bartoletti (European University Institute, Florence): Insect Collections and the History of Capitalism: Economic Entomology in Plantations ca. 1890-1930

Philipp Krauer (Staatsarchiv Schwyz) & Stephanie Willi (ETH Archive): A Repository of Colonial Knowledge: Decolonizing the ETH Archives and its Globally Entangled Collections

Keynote lecture:
Suman Seth (Cornell University): Postcolonial and Indigenous Science Studies: Dialogues and Differences

Structural Legacies – Contemporary Global Inequality in Education & Research
Poster Presentations by the MAS Development and Cooperation: Decolonizing Aid

Roundtable on Diversity in Faculty:
Moderation: Ana Sobral (Postcolonial Spectacles)
- Debjani Bhattacharyya (University of Zurich): Whose University is it, anyways?
- Danielle Isler (University of Bayreuth): When Doing Nothing is Tiring – Trying to Challenge Colonial Legacies while Trying to live and Heal

Roundtable on Museums & Restitutions:
Moderation: Anja Laukötter (Jena University)
- Annette Bhagwati (Rietberg Musem Zurich): "Provincializing" Art History: New Approaches and Curatorial Strategies at the Museum Rietberg
- Mareile Flitsch (Ethnographic Museum Zurich): Skilling for Dialogue – Some Remarks from Social Anthropology on Decolonizing Curricula
- Vitjitua Ndjiharine (Dekoloniale Berlin): The Schinz Collection at the Ethnographic Museum Zürich

Roundtable on Decolonizing Curricula:
Moderation: Olivia Killias (University of Zurich)
- Robert Kramm (Munich Centre for Global History, LMU Munich): Radical History: Old and New Perspectives in Research and Teaching
- Shose Kessi (Cape Town University): Decolonial Curriculum Reform: the UCT Experience
- Munir Fasheh (Arab Education Forum/JOHUD): The Challenge at the Roots is to Reclaim What Has Been Made Invisible

Keynote lecture:
Clémentine Deliss (University of Cambridge/KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin): The Enquiring Eye: Contentious Collections and their Remediation

Dismantling Colonial Legacies – Searching Solutions beyond Academia
Zürich Kolonial: Guided Tour: Colonial Legacies in the City of Zurich

Roundtable on Demontage des kolonialen Erbes – Dekolonisierung jenseits der Akademie:
Moderation: Adam Fehr (SRF 4)
- Georg Kreis (Prof. em. University of Basel)
- Hannan Salamat (ZIID Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog)
- Jovita dos Santos Pinto (University of Bern)
- Dembah Fofanah (VoDa.)
- Corine Mauch (City Mayor of Zurich)