

# What Do We Mean by Decolonizing Education?

Responses from the Humanities Across Borders Network

At a talk given at the Hague campus of the Leiden University in September last year,<sup>1</sup> I reflected upon academic ontologies and the question of decolonising education through a description of the three intertwined facets, phases or frames circumscribing the lives of a scholar. A career in higher education, whether as a student, or an early/late career professional is, arguably, governed by a techno-productive, a market, and a vogue life.

Drawing from an analogy of the life-cycle of a product of techno-industrial, capitalist production, the life-cycle of a scholar is also marked by very high rates of obsolescence, both of the self as well as of academic output.<sup>2</sup> In the techno-productive face of higher education, one must accept becoming a statistic in the global proliferation of academic knowledge production via the Internet and other digital technologies. In order not to become obsolete, one must learn to function within a milieu of push and pull technologies that ultimately serve EduTech platforms

that are increasingly becoming the norm for universities the world over. Not only that, there is also the self-objectification practice one must endure to find a place within the different metrics of excellence, or evaluation criteria such as publications and citation indices.

Becoming a valuable resource in the race to tenure-track placement within the higher education industry marks the market life of a scholar in higher education. This is the commercial value, in terms of jobs and funding that an individual can attract or has access to. Education capital is often, but not always, proportional to social, economic,

and geopolitical positionalities within the competitive and closed marketplace of neo-liberalized higher education. Who has this capital? How many generations ago? The market values of the university campus and its revenues from undergraduate courses usually trump historical dis-privilege. And then there is the allure of fashionable research fields, often linked to dominating knowledge circles led by luminary professors. Scholars must align one way or another to waves of shifting knowledge preferences within academe. Disciplinary closure can often be alienating. And negotiating one's relationship to a subject

of study, and finding meaning within it, a lifelong struggle.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of IIAS, we asked colleagues and students from the Humanities Across Borders network to share their responses to a question: "What do we mean by decolonizing education?" In what follows, we present various ways of approaching the prompt: some are new writings from partners, while others were first published previously in *The Newsletter* or on the HAB website (<http://humanitiesacrossborders.org>). Each of these voices speak of an encounter, a reflection, or an engagement within the HAB framework of education collaboration, beyond conventional disciplinary folds, each searching for knowledge and meaning in dialogue and exchange.

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Right: HAB colleagues (from left, Rita Padawangi, Jyothi Thirivikraman, Min Chin Chiang, Aarti Kawlra, Laura Erber, Jody Benjamin, Genner Ortis Llanes, Eric Lawer, and Mohomodou Houssouba) at the *Craft as Method* workshop in Saint Louis, Senegal October 2022. (Photo courtesy of Rita Padawangi, 2022)



## Notes

- 1 "Meaning of Decolonizing Education & the 3 Lives of a Student-Scholar" opening talk at the *INSOCH Inaugural Conference, The Hague LU Campus, September 29, 2022*
- 2 Uberoi, J.P.S., 2008. *Sociology of Commerce and Industry, or the Three Lives of Things. Sociological bulletin*, 57(1), pp.41-60.

## HAB and its Role within IIAS

Philippe Peycam

With its fundamental cross-cultural, inter-regional foundations – starting with its Asian, African, but of course also European backgrounds – HAB had the ambition to engage with the need to re-enchant the universal act of education. To do so, it set about engaging with the often biased geo-politico-institutional economy of knowledge production and dissemination, and in general with the position of the university, often considered as a bulwark of conservatism and hierarchy, itself often associated with the West's lingering normative dominance.

As opposed to the usual initiatives aimed at decolonizing education, mainly engaged in negative deconstructing actions, HAB has, from the onset, prioritized the exploration of new, creative – and therefore positive – methods of knowledge transmission. It has done so by seeking to transcend institutional fragmentations of knowledge by engaging headstrong with communal local experiences, encountered especially in societies where the import from Europe of the university model never fully overwhelmed other more traditional modes of knowledge and their acts of transmission. For this reason, it

was necessary for the programme to start with concrete areas of lived/experienced knowledge, rooted in human activities, regardless of their situation, location, and backgrounds. These were the four 'sites of knowledge' that are food, space, words, and making. Around these inclusive, universal – and therefore humanistic – thematic frameworks (to which some others were added: e.g., health, death, etc.), different forms of enquiry, including those considered most specialised or scientific, could be mobilised in a way that they would regain their true role and function in the service to society, and not the other way round. By definition, an initiative like that of HAB is fundamentally experimental and experiential. It often takes unexpected forms of action. It is fundamentally subversive yet always constructive.

Perhaps its most important and lasting legacy is HAB's demonstration of the need

for any academic institutional undertaking to allow for an open, institutionalised space of inter-cultural, inter-disciplinary and inter-sectorial intellectual experiment. This is also one of the best justifications for IIAS's existence as it stands today, beyond its original narrow Area Studies assignment. This spirit of intellectual experimentation provides an institute like IIAS the kind of multi-functional facilitating purpose at the intersection of the acts of research, education, dissemination, community building, and civic engagement. IIAS owes a lot to HAB for its unsettling questioning and its constant reminder of necessary self-reflexivity in regard to what it can achieve for the academic and civic community as a whole.

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