Charting Paths to Decolonise Economic Geography



DOI reference: 10.1080/13673882.2024.12466418

By Evans Korang Adjei (email: evans.kadjei@umu.se), Centre for Regional Science, Umeå University, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (Orcid.org) and Morales, Diana (corresponding author, email: diana.morales@umu.se), Geography Department, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (Orcid.org).

Introduction

A previous publication advocated for integrating decolonial perspectives as a transversal principle to the practice and progress of economic geography (Morales, 2024). In this paper, we propose tools to achieve this goal, highlighting the opportunities that the expansion and diversification of the subdiscipline presents for doing so, anecdotally, we observe increased representation of women and individuals from diverse backgrounds at major conferences, in graduate schools, and as early career researchers (we are yet to witness such diversification at more advanced career stages). This presents a great opportunity to expand our theorisations, engage with different expertise and backgrounds, and learn from different geographies. However, diversifying the pool of economic geographers is not enough, we need to challenge, revise, and transform the structures, practices, and ideologies that have perpetuated colonial legacies in the areas of theory, curriculum and pedagogy, methodology, and the dissemination of research, in both education and practice. This may be an uncomfortable and lengthy, but necessary task. Here we propose some ideas on how to start.

Strategies to decolonise

Decolonising while theorising

Like any academic discipline, economic geography has a community of scholars, a rich tradition of inquiry, distinct modes of investigation, established criteria for generating new knowledge, and robust communication networks. Yet, it's increasingly evident that the limitations imposed by overarching narratives and monocultural viewpoints are problematic (e.g., Shahjahan et al., 2021, Werner et al., 2017). It is fair to say that these epistemes have upheld and reproduce present-day spatial inequalities. Hence, an important starting point is to dismantle the academic colonial legacies and Eurocentric dominance in theorising that is shaping the practice of economic geography.

According to Yeung (2023), postcolonialism has made significant strides into geography since the mid-1990s, shifting from analysing colonial representations to empowering marginalised voices to represent themselves on their own terms. That said, economic geography still needs to be open *theorise from difference* (McDowell, 1995), for example, using and exploring alternative theories of growth

and regional development (such as the concept of Buen Vivir and ubuntu philosophy) to explore and question uneven regional development, or what development means in different geopolitical contexts (Pike et al., 2023). Another example is the conceptualisation of space. It is well espoused in the literature that space is not given but (co)produced via unending social relations (cf. Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994, 2005). While power dynamics are recognised as key in space production, it is clothed in Eurocentric views (Escobar, 2014). Economic geography can benefit by integrating diverse cultural elements and everyday practices in conceptualising space production to disentangle colonial legacies influencing urban-settlement styles and shaping the uneven economic geography of urban areas (Chronopoulos et al., 2021). This expands, enhances, and reflects the identities and histories of the local communities where the theories are translated into policies, programs, and interventions.

In curriculum and pedagogy

Decolonising an academic discipline may mean different things in different contexts due to varying relationships with geopolitical power centres. For example, a decolonial discipline should reflect in the curriculum, pedagogy, and practices, where non-western epistemes and interests are given the same priority (synthesising or integrating) as western epistemes (e.g., Le Grange, 2016). It should also mean removing colonial elements from the curriculum and replacing them with indigenous elements (e.g., Mngomezulu & Hadebe, 2018) hence, introducing local epistemologies and experiences, or introducing alternative knowledge paths (e.g., Dutta, 2018). To others, decolonising an academic discipline means finding the balance between local perspectives and global advancements without necessarily imposing colonisers perspectives over the oppressed or the colony (Diab et al., 2019).

After reviewing a global population of articles on decolonising curriculum and pedagogy, Shahjahan et al. (2021) identified four broad ways of decolonising an academic discipline that can be adapted in economic geography. Decolonising economic geography can be accomplished through, first, critiquing and probing the positionality of knowledge within the curriculum and discipline. Educators can regularly question whose knowledge and what knowledge qualified as important and more legitimate when developing curricula. This leads to the second point, constructing an inclusive curriculum consciously integrating multicultural knowledge. Third, fostering relational teaching and learning, emphasising on the

coproduction of knowledge among educators and students. Finally, connecting with and between higher education institutions, community, and socio-political movements inside/outside higher education. We must encourage collaboration between academic institutions, local communities, civil societies, and policy makers to co-create solutions that can address unique problems and promote transformational changes beyond GDP and employment.

We believe that diverse perspectives on curricula development (e.g., gender and critical race theory) and bringing indigenous knowledge are welcomed in the teaching of economic geography. We must encourage and include diverse perspectives or scenarios on growth and development, especially the experiences of people from marginalised communities. It could mean including indigenous and local knowledge systems in course development. By this, we are not only acknowledging the unique ways people understand and interact with their environments, or the diversity among students' population, but also creating the ground on which great academic, economic, and political discovery can be made.

In method and methodology

Every research is guided by a set of philosophical foundations (Held, 2019), hence, the need to adapt every research method and methodology to the philosophical underpinnings of the context and participating group or people. Decolonised methods and methodologies in research and pedagogy are steps in accepting and appreciating alternative science and knowledge production. We can engage with this by challenging the assumptions that only the knowledge obtained with certain methods and methodologies are valid. Thus, decolonising economic geography will require more engagement with collaborative methodologies that involve a wider range of actors and perspectives (i.e., interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, local communities, students, etc.). This allows co-creating solutions to address the problems that the subdiscipline strives to solve, including recent concerns over greening economies and sustainable transformations. A good example, with a long-standing tradition, are participatory action research methods (PAR), community-technical interface, focus group discussion (or Sharing Circles in indigenous studies), collaboration with local Non-Governmental Organisations and Civil Societies Organisations, and Research-Community Festivals where research outcomes are presented to participating communities in a culturally consonant ways (e.g., Lavallée, 2009). These methodologies, all able to be used in economic geography, provide

researchers with an overview and understanding of the socio-economic structures, assist with local protocols and empower local communities in owning the outcomes of the research and challenge the traditional top-down approaches.

The significance of participatory methods and methodologies stems from the frequent neglect of the most affected populations, regions, and communities — such as rural areas, indigenous/local populations, and women — in policy negotiations, debates, and implementations. Unfortunately, certain methodologies fall in the same mistake, exploiting knowledge and failing to prioritise the participation of the affected individuals, let alone aligning with their terms or perspectives (Held, 2019). By implicitly dismissing alternative sciences and popular knowledge, these methods contribute to a narrow, tunnel-visioned understanding of science and knowledge within the discipline.

The question of methods becomes more complex in quantitative research, where databases are often constructed externally by institutions beyond our control. However, the mere presence of quantifiable data in these databases does not guarantee impartiality. So, a step forward is reviewing and acknowledging the existing biases in databases (Christie et al., 2020) (there is an extensive debate in this regard in media, the academy, and politics). Another way forward would be the adoption of open-source quantitative databases aimed at examining regional development issues that have gone through processes of decolonisation from Western-centric metrics of development, poverty, and employment, or start building the databases following those principles (Chilisa, 2012; Held, 2019).

In the dissemination of research

Decolonisation of an academic discipline goes beyond the ethos (theorising, methodology, and pedagogy) of the discipline, it also reaches how research is disseminated and communicated. We envision this goal in three stages. First, the dissemination or sharing research findings with research participants (knowledge holders) and other relevant social actors, second, the role of research centres, universities, and professional associations in disseminating alternative science and knowledge, and finally, citation practices.

Research outputs are tailored for communication within the academic community (via scientific journals, conferences, etc.) (Dirks, 2021; Mackenzie et al., 2013) and policy corridors (via policy briefs, etc.), neglecting non-academic participants.

To decolonise such practices within economic geography will require the dissolution of knowledge ownership (by researchers) and develop the culture of sharing research findings in every form with participating communities and other relevant social actors. This entails identifying the most suitable dissemination channels (e.g., local news outlets, social media, etc.) and employing appropriate language. As Nelson Mandela said, 'when you communicate in a language one understands, it goes into their head, but when you communicate in their language, it goes to their heart'. Therefore, research findings in economic geography should be disseminated in a manner and language that resonates with the involved community or group, free from colonial standards and assumptions.

The responsibility for research dissemination extends beyond individual researchers; professional and academic institutions and associations also play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and diversity in the dissemination process. It is their role to spotlight research outputs influenced by non-Western philosophies and carried out by scholars with diverse backgrounds, ensuring that all authors are sufficiently recognised in equal terms. It is essential to be aware of which authors receive recognition and which are overlooked, as well as which types of research garner attention. This requires a critical examination of dissemination protocols to ensure they align with the principles of diversity and equal opportunities.

Decolonisation efforts also include questioning our citation practices, challenging and dismantling hegemonic knowledge structures. Revising our citation practices involve actively seeking out and citing works by scholars from diverse backgrounds, regions, and epistemological traditions. By doing so, economic geography can acknowledge the contributions of previously marginalised voices and counteract the biases inherent in traditional citation practices, which often prioritise the work of old white men (Rosenman et al., 2020). Decolonisation initiatives aim to de-centre dominant narratives and amplify underrepresented voices, this means a deliberate shift towards inclusive citation practices that prioritise works from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, including those of transgender scholars (Coman, 2018).

Conclusions

Decolonising economic geography is a complex and lengthy task. Unravelling its colonial legacies implies arduous work of self and collective reflection: addressing

our unconscious biases, acknowledging who sits in our classrooms, how are we attending to their needs, and questioning whether we are empowering and providing a safe space for disadvantaged students and minority colleagues to address questions of inequality and discrimination. It also means questioning who we are erasing from our teaching, discourses and academic practice, questioning whether we see the marked and subtle differences amongst our students and colleagues and what language we are using: do we still say 'developing countries'? Is our language ableist, racist, misogynist? Is it inclusive?

Decolonising may be a slow process but an important one to be started. Our universities and workplaces are constantly striving for internationalisation of students, staff, collaborations and study subjects, our research addresses questions that cannot be answered with unidimensional views, and well, it is time to catch up with other social sciences.

References

Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Christie, A.P., Abecasis, D., Adjeroud, M., Alonso, J.C., Amano, T., Anton, A., Baldigo, B.P., Barrientos, R., Bicknell, J.E., Buhl, D.A., Cebrian, J., Ceia, R.S., Cibils-Martina, L., Clarke, S., Claudet, J., Craig, M.D., Davoult, D., De Backer, A., Donovan, M.K., … Sutherland, W.J. (2020). Quantifying and addressing the prevalence and bias of study designs in the environmental and social sciences. *Nature Communications*, 11(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-20142-y

Chronopoulos, D.K., Kampanelis, S., Oto-Peralias, D. & Wilson, J.O.S. (2021). Ancient colonialism and the economic geography of the Mediterranean. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 21, 717-759.

Coman, J. (2018). Trans citation practices — a quick-and-dirty guideline. Medium. Available at https://mxcoman.medium.com/trans-citation-practices-a-quick-and-dirty-guideline-9f4168117115

Escobar, A. (2014) Sentipensar con la tierra: nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y diferencia. Medellín: Universidad Autónoma Latinoamericana UNAULA.

Diab, M., Veronese, G., Jamei, Y.A., & Kagee, A. (2019). The interplay of paradigms: Decolonizing a psychology curriculum in the context of the siege of Gaza. *Nordic Psychology*, 72(3), 183-198.

Dirks, L.G. (2021). Collaborative research results dissemination. Applying postcolonial theory to Indigenous community contexts. In. K. Toeppe, H. Yan. & Chu, S.K.W (Eds), Diversity, divergence, dialogue. 16th International Conference, Conference 2021, Beijing, China.

Dutta, U. (2018). Decolonizing community in community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 62(3–4), 272-282.

Held, M.B.E. (2019). Decolonizing research paradigms in the context of Settle Colonialism. An unsettling, mutual, and collaborative effort. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8, 1-16.

Le Grange, L. (2016). Decolonising the university curriculum. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30(2), 1-12.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. (Translated by Nicholson-Smith, D.). Oxford, OX, UK, Wiley-Blackwell.

Lavallée, L.F. (2009). Practical application of an indigenous research framework and two qualitative indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 21-40.

McDowell, L. (1995). Understanding diversity: the problem of/for "theory." In R. J. J. P. J. T. M. J. Watts (Ed.), *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World in the Late-Twentieth Century* (Ron J. Joh, pp. 280–294). Blackwell.

MacKenzie, C.A, Christensen, J. & Turner, S. (2013). Advocating beyond the academy: Dilemmas of communicating relevant research results. *Qualitative Research*, 15(1), 105–121.

Massey, D. (1994). Space, place, and gender. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Massey, D. (2005). For space. London: Sage Publication Ltd.

Mngomezulu, B.R. & Hadebe, S. (2018). What would the decolonisation of a

political science curriculum entail? Lessons to be learnt from the East African experience at the Federal University of East Africa. *Politikon*, 45(1), 66-80.

Morales, D. (2024). Decolonising Economic Geography. *Regions*, 17.

Rosenman, E., Loomis, J., & Kay, K. (2020). Diversity, representation, and the limits of engaged pluralism in (economic) geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(3), 510–533. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519833453

Salonen, H. & Lumi, T. (2024). Can local value creation induce a sense of justice during green transition? A study of six rural areas in Denmark, Finland, and Norway. *Nordregio Report* 2023:9.

Shahjahan, R.A., Eestera, A.L., Surla, K.L. & Edwards, K.T. (2022). Decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy: A comparative review across disciplines and global higher education contexts. *Review of Educational Research*, 92(1), 73-113.

Werner, M., Strauses, K., Parker, B., Orzeck, R., Derickson, K. & Bonds, A. (2017). Feminist political economy in geography: Why now, what is different, and what for? *Geoforum*, 79, pp. 1–4.

Yeung, H.W. (2023). *Theory and Explanation in Geography*. Wiley Professional, Reference and Trade.