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## Post-colonial intellectual counter-spaces under threat



Michael W Charney 26 September 2021

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The problem with university education globally goes beyond the need to reassert pre-colonial universities, but rests with the historic purpose of the university itself.

Modern university education has generally been structured according to *state-think*. State-think refers here to the reinforcement of structures of thought that limit thinking to particular avenues favoured by the state, in the hopes of ensuring that while the university product may support many different political choices, alternatives that would fundamentally change the political order do not show up on the graduate's intellectual register.

Universities in many former colonies were consciously *designed* to be places for *state-think*. Select indigenous youth of means and merit would walk into these institutions as elite children and walk out colonial bureaucrats, military officers and intermediary elites.

These institutions were intended to teach the colonial mother tongue, European ideas and values as well as both obedience and the figurative whip through the provision of certain kinds of knowledge and behaviour.

The true importance of university education was the legitimization of the huge global and racial disparities in wealth and a justification of why most non-whites 'deserved' to be servants and cultivators or cheap factory labour.

### Post-colonial universities

The primary mission of later post-colonial universities remained not to develop critical thinking but to teach their students *what* to think, to reinforce an imaginary in which certain political and economic elites are dominant as the only possible and acceptable world in which to live and to suppress any deviation from conformity.

Early critics recognised this path ahead, arguing that many of the key concepts championed by universities in the West, such as academic freedom, were merely paid lip service to by post-colonial university leaders without fully understanding what these concepts contained.

As students and academics, Asians and Africans have also, historically, struggled within universities to carve out spaces to challenge these efforts, to explore, experiment and question.

Many colonial-era Asians and Africans found in their education all the things the colonial state did not wish them to see, learned about revolutionary ideology, why the global disparity in wealth was one result of slavery and exploitation, and, eventually, why their own modes of thought were not inferior.

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Universities in Africa and Asia continued to train the governing and commercial elites, but they also produced the revolutionaries and thinkers who would effectively lead their countries to independence, often violently, but always successfully.

This is the historically conditioned role of universities and this development is one of many features of the arrival at a free and open society.

Yes, the attempt to impose *state-think* in universities is true in these universities as well because it comes out of bureaucratic rationality not social morality. So, I am not worried about states trying to determine what universities teach.

Again, there are historical reasons why this expectation by governing elites is valid. While governments in democratic and democratic-aspiring societies have one version of *state-think* that can tolerate a fairly high level of contravention, authoritarian and military governments have less tolerance, or none at all.

The end of the Cold War saw many of these regimes replaced by popularly elected civilian governments. In the restored state context, universities returned to normalcy.

A successful post-colonial university is not solely a state project but is instead a historical phenomenon where an *intellectual counter-space* was successfully forced open to contest the state project.

Such a university would necessarily be a battleground where the *state-think* could be challenged and students, whether they leave as conformists or revolutionaries, have at least had the opportunity to question the order of things, to change, even just a little, and come out better able to make their own choices as a result.

### Sub-colonial universities

In the past decade or so, however, the retreat of democracy across these regions has worked against the historical role of universities across Africa and Asia. This has meant the increasingly effective erasure of the *intellectual counter-spaces* of both students and academics by the invisible hands of varied interests that will be referred to here merely as officially recognised 'stakeholders' (business owners, governing political parties, militaries and so on).

Observers often confuse as intellectual counter-spaces the many high-profile research centres that have popped up at well-founded post-colonial universities since the 1990s.

Universities are not just being clever about the checklist of things that they need to have to gain a good international reputation; there is a pathological need to possess in form (but as it often works out, not truly in content) the things that validate universities in the eyes of the West, as the radical young Nigerian sociologist Dr Omafume Onoge testified before a judicial enquiry after the Nigerian police fired on students at the University of Ibadan on 1 February 1971, killing one.

The term used at the court was 'sub-colonial' to describe a former colonial university that was not geared to serving the needs of indigenous society but continued to operate according to the old colonial template.

This remains the case in much of Africa and South and Southeast Asia today. Universities cloak themselves with high profile links with elite institutions elsewhere, by creating nominal centres for critical thought, often bringing in internationally famous academicians.

This game is about pretending to encourage critical thinking only to

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win higher ratings in international university rankings. The illusion of critical thought afforded by the existence of high-profile research centres masks the reality of a very regulated, closely monitored and highly risky intellectual commons.

These appendages usually succumb to the *colonial mode of university education* like the rest of the institution and the famous personages they import flee.

This closing up of genuine intellectual counter-spaces marks the critical moment when universities go from saying this is what the state wishes to teach you, to this is what the state limits your understanding to be.

Worryingly, this appears to be the trend for some time into the future and there is little that can be done beyond helping students and academics in post-colonial universities defend their *intellectual counter-spaces* by providing, even just virtually, intellectual lifelines that reach over the invisible shields of the authoritarian-minded 'stakeholders'.

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