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'Beyond' critique: universities, human rights, decolonisation, and the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

The decolonial turn has catalysed an overwhelming literature on decolonisation, its meanings, barriers, opportunities, and limitations. In this paper, we investigate the possibilities of going *beyond* decolonisation through a critical treatment of the discourses of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the university. We argue that the SDGs are a development species of the global human rights framework in the present moment and that decolonisation is sometimes both collapsed into and radically separated from human rights in ways that limit its potential. This makes for an interesting exploration of the interconnections between these powerful ideas from the perspective of 'the critical' as a way of reading *beyond*.

KEYWORDS

Critique; decolonisation; higher education; human rights; Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The decolonial turn has catalysed an overwhelming literature on decolonisation, its meanings, barriers, opportunities, and limitations. In this paper, we investigate the possibilities of going *beyond* decolonisation through a critical treatment of the discourses of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the university. We argue that the SDGs are a development species of the global human rights framework in the present moment and that decolonisation is sometimes both collapsed into and radically separated from human rights in ways that limit its potential. This makes for an interesting exploration of the interconnections between these powerful ideas from the perspective of 'the critical' as a way of reading *beyond*.

It seems that nowadays the academy has become susceptible to the uncritical assimilation of dominant discourses into its modes of thinking and doing. More often than not, these frameworks are presented outside the reach of critique, placing the intellectual function of the university at risk. While decolonisation and human rights have long been recognised as influential languages through which the public and social justice role of higher education has been articulated (see Cargas and Mitoma 2019), two

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discourses in particular – techno-rationality (see Keet, Staphorst, Penkler, and Phuza 2023) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) – seem to uncritically steer our interpretive horizons of the university.

Amongst the multiple time-honoured purposes of the university, and given our current set of socio-economic and planetary crises, the academy's role as conscience and critic is now more important than ever before. In this article, we deploy a particular notion of critique as a way of reading *beyond* in order to answer two questions. First, how can we understand the wholesale incorporation of the human rights discourse as a frame for decolonisation within the academy? And second, how did this successful interpellation pave the way for the SDGs, as a species of rights (see Kaltenborn, Krajewski, and Kuhn 2020) to generate (similarly to techno-rationality) such high levels of 'unearned' legitimacy in such a short space of time?

In engaging these questions, we treat the critical as a genre of *beyond* in which the critical is not an 'after' nor a 'post' but a shift towards revitalising our engagement with valuable ideas, such as decolonisation and human rights, that are trapped in circularity. Or, as is the case with the SDGs, a discourse that presents such an overwhelming hegemonic social logic that critique is *a priori* disallowed or is at least frowned upon. Crucially, our conceptualisation of *beyond* presupposes a critique of the critical itself. We begin with a brief discussion of *beyond* as a critical position, followed by an examination of the discourses of decolonisation and human rights as contemporary social justice frames for the academy. We then turn our attention to the SDGs, using the concepts of human rights and decolonisation to bolster a critical discussion of the SDGs as perhaps the most recent expression of hegemonic social logic within the university, using *beyond* as a reflexive position from which to critique.

The critical as beyond[1]

To make our notion of the critical clearer, we propose a distinction between *double critique* and the critical as *beyond*. The concept of *double critique* has a productive theoretical history, a 'confrontation of Self and Other' (Amine 2013, 3), and internal and external critique, so to speak. In decolonial terms, double critique may require us 'to oppose the Western episteme to its own untheorized outside *and* to radicalize its margins […] by thinking otherwise' (Lionnet 2011, 400). For Mignolo, 'double critique is in a way moving from the "post" to the "de"; not to "deconstruction", but to "decoloniality"' (2006, 492), while Marx's (1843/1987) tradition of 'immanent critique' has offered a useful theoretical grounding for thinking the critical as *beyond*. At first, the argument here may appear straightforward. Double critique, though deployed differentially amongst theorists, suggests a double movement of critique: internal-external, centre–margin, and so on. Our preferred way of reading *beyond*, as the organising principle of this special issue, takes us further: it suggests double critique as more than simply a double movement, but as critique from multiple perspectives: *beyond* the binaries of double critique, and critical of its own horizons. Criticality *beyond* is critical of itself so that it may dislodge, rather than reproduce, the circular argumentation that nowadays characterises some strands of critical work in universities.

Central to the critical as *beyond* is the capacity to think 'otherwise'; that is, to think outside of our receivable categories and accepted 'truths', unafraid of turning our

central assumptions upside-down. For example, how is it that the SDGs, a constellation of frames that have created a socio-economic and ecological crisis, are hailed as well-suited to address this crisis? (How) Do the SDGs ensnare our horizons of universities? What imaginary of higher education is presupposed within the SDGs? Reading *beyond* allows us to articulate these questions, cut through surface appearances, disrupt our ossified interpretive schemes, and go behind (and beyond) that which we produce as truth. And in this, we may fail.

At the heart of critique, so we argue, is renewal and revitalisation: 'the transformation of our cultural traditions, institutions, knowledges and practices in a world in which current social, political, cultural and economic arrangements only further serve to structurally anchor inequalities, discrimination and exclusion' (Keet 2014a, 135). We also align with Holloway's definition of critique as 'the opening of categories that are closed, to reveal the antagonism within them, to reveal the crisis that they conceal' (2012, 515). In the opening of categories, we find the ways in 'which human activity is organised' (ibid), including the structures from which our thoughts are arranged.

Rebughini (2018) foregrounds the notion of critique as developed by the canonical work of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and their numerous twentieth-century interpreters. She reads this alongside the American pragmatism of Dewey and Mead, in which 'critical agency can be associated with the creativity of seeking innovative solutions, rather than with rejection of and opposition to a given social order' (Dewey 1973). Accordingly, critical agency arises from critical situations. We think, however, that Rebughini gives insufficient credit to the praxis of emancipation as formulated within critical theories of all sorts, which have guided activist practices across the world for many decades. What Rebughini does offer is the possibility for developing the capacity 'to produce critique by imagining the "new" [and] denying the "given"' (2018, 16). It is the work, she further argues, of 'imagination and actualization', where 'critique can arise from the creation of alternatives generated by internal and unpredictable transformations' (ibid). This suggests that critical agencies have an unstable openness and incompleteness that, despite their fragility, try to catch up 'with the right moment, where resistance and creativity, unveiling and redemption can meet' (Rebughini 2018, 16).

These formulations of the critical – as an opening of closed categories, as creative and redemptive – correspond well with the current moment, in which the decolonisation debate and the SDG frenzy in higher education have emerged as a set of closed categories with weak or non-existent internal self-critiques. Decolonisation, as far as progressive thought in universities is concerned, has presented itself as both an epistemic and political adjudicator of anything and everything (see Táíwò 2022) and has thus been limited by its current framings. The SDGs, on the other hand, formulated within the 'neoliberal juggernaut' (Doherty 2015), captured the global higher education sector first as an inescapable funding platform and then as an incontestable ideology. In both cases, the critical is well placed to catch up with the right moment to challenge these developments. It should do so to generate the outside of dominant discourses by bringing into view 'that which is obscured when there is no critical outside' (Williams 2009, 629). The absence of a 'critical outside' has long been an inherent weakness of the human rights framework and seems now to be endemic to the decolonisation and SDG discourses in the present.

Keenly aware that the massive intellectual history of critical theory has not been immune to setting up its own dogmas, we underscore the idea that the *critical* must

also go *beyond* to challenge the 'self-certainty of the critical attitude that confidently assumes that it is really in the know' (Hoy 2004, 237). In this way, the *critical* is called upon to confront its own codes, dogmas, and doctrines. The praxes and transformative actions that emerge from the *critical* must, therefore, discard their own self-certainty so as to be self-critical, 'reflect on [their] own contingent circumstances and contextual limitations, and thus, remain open to moderation and other possibilities' (ibid., 238–239). A large portion of the critical work in and on higher education in South Africa and elsewhere, including decolonisation interventions, does not, in our estimation, sufficiently meet this criterion of self-criticality. The *beyond* angle may be one way of working to correct this.

The critical has long been a defining principle of the work being done at Nelson Mandela University, under the umbrella of *Critical University Studies* (CUS), as a way of approaching the study of higher education. Through the *Beyond Decolonisation* roundtable hosted in 2022, CUS has sought to develop a disclosing yet productive critique of decolonisation whilst also contributing to a critical ontology of the academy itself. The research programme, initially funded by the NRF and currently by the NIHSS, is both conceptual and empirical, qualitative and quantitative. It also works towards a central criterion for critical studies; that is, the critique and alternatives to be formulated must have some kind of empirical foothold within the reality of the challenges it aims to address. This type of *critical*, we acknowledge, requires demanding and courageous 'reflective processes of self-clarification' (Kompridis 2006, 8) within the academy to engage with our forms of life, cultural traditions, academic dispositions, privileges, and social practices.

We have also argued that the *critical* should not be 'blind to the considerable complexities of higher education (Keet and Cross 2020, xx) and that it is petitioned to engage critically and analytically with the United Nations' (UN) 2030 SDGs[2] and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Our departure point is that our imagination of the university is steered by sets of discursive frames that emerge as competing narratives, each vying for a stake in the university's sense of itself. These frames take on varying levels of influence across time and space and play themselves out in distinct ways at various points of development. In South Africa, higher education within and outside universities has, since 1994 and during different periods, been immersed in the over-proximity of transformation, human rights, decolonisation, and social justice rhetoric and, most recently, the introduction of the SDGs.

Human rights and decolonisation

In order to go *beyond* in critiquing the SDGs, we must begin with a discussion of the frames within which it is emerging: the discourses of human rights and decolonisation. In the case of human rights, which we have reflected upon elsewhere (Keet et al. 2023; Zembylas and Keet 2019), the South Africa of the 1990s was constructed as the UN's 'poster child', and its 'birth' was narrated as the first successful outcome of deliberate efforts to create a human rights state, commonly referred to as the 'miracle of South Africa'. A triad of mechanisms – Constitutional Court, Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the South African Human Rights Commission – together with other independent bodies supporting constitutional democracy and the Constitution itself, emerged as the

'formal framers' of the 'rights' discourse post-1994. This happened within the context of a 'sea-change in global politics and the rise of human rights as the archetypal language of democratic transition' (Wilson 2001, 1). It would be difficult to find any law or policy of this era, and later, that is not framed by the language of rights. This is also the case for education law and policy as reflected in the regime governing higher education. Referred to as the 'golden age' of global human rights, this period gave rise to human rights idolatry, and the transitional justice paradigm became South Africa's prime export commodity. Human Rights and Transitional Justice, in a sense, emerged as two co-constitutive secular religions in which human principles are elevated into unquestioned absolutes (see Hopgood 2015). This trend was also carried into education research in which human rights could commonsensically justify, without rigorous motivation, the topics and modes of inquiry within the academy. The logic of rights is also observably embedded in research on decolonisation and the SDGs. That is, like all dogma, their mere incantation is regarded as sufficient justification. And, like human rights, they set up their own economies, markets, and privileges with carefully policed boundaries.

There exists a range of critiques of human rights, from its outright dismissal and proclaimed *end(s)* (see Baxi 2008; Douzinas 2000; Hopgood 2015; Mutua 1996) to its twinning with neoliberal logics and the governing of 'rightless' subjects (see Gündoğdu 2015). These are interesting and productive developments since rights, despite being on the 'backfoot', have retained their status as the global lingua franca. Some, like Krastev (2014), have argued that the waves of global protest express a 'pervasive distrust in democratic institutions' (Bawa 2021, 154) and a distrust in human rights and its agencies. This distrust emerged against the backdrop of the dominance of the 'new right' – a coalition 'comprising market liberals and political conservatives' (Olssen, Codd, and O'Neill 2004, 134) – that took hold of our political horizons in many parts of the world. In these protests, human rights discourse features in two formats. First, as a mobilising force around its negative opposite of human rights violations; and second, as its own 'outside' that acts as an instrument to animate human rights beyond its codified limits. Both these formats pursue human rights beyond their staleness by continuously reinvesting rights with social activism. Amongst others, Chatterjee's (2006) and Hopgood's (2015) work are instructive in making sense of the emergence of a form of *human rights* unburdened by the official transnational human rights regime.

One may speculate that an unburdened and activist human rights, in conversation with its formalised and institutionalised framings, resulted in the current steady growth of critical human rights offerings in universities (Cargas and Mitoma 2019; Tibbitts and Keet 2023). Nevertheless, this change has taken almost three decades to materialise, considering that the initial hegemony of human rights was rooted in its own religion. Though human rights discourse, in various formats, is reasserting itself, it is not yet clear whether it can survive its promise by being reconstituted outside of itself, as some human rights activist scholars are trying to do. Many would argue that the current version of the decolonisation movement is such an attempt, whilst others have simply collapsed radical conceptions of human rights with decolonisation thinking.

At the height of the most recent expression of the decolonisation movement, Shetty (2018, par. 5), the Secretary General of Amnesty International, argued that 'the essence of human rights and decolonisation are basically the same thing: the struggle for freedom against the abuse of power. The modern human rights framework as we

know it was born in the crucible of decolonisation'. Yet, it was the general acceptance of the failure of codified rights that is sometimes forwarded as a contributing factor to the stronger emergence of decolonisation frameworks in South African (and other) universities in the mid-2010s: that is, decolonisation is seen as the re-radicalisation of human rights. Nevertheless, the logical connection between rights, decolonisation, and development is an argument that is widely advanced (see Dikkumbura 2022; Falola 2021; Gómez Sánchez 2020).

The frames of decolonisation and decoloniality were, during the #FeesMustFall protests, leveraged by students as an ideological battle that went beyond mere 'transformation' and sought to confront Western/White/Christian/patriarchal bias in knowledge production and consumption. Although these were necessary engagements, the collapsing of all the university's ills into the umbrella term of decolonisation resulted in a fragmented and discursively haphazard set of meanings and programmes and a series of 'techno-bureaucratic fixes that have led us … to the current *cul-de-sac*' (A. J. Mbembe 2016, 32). For some, decolonisation referred to transformation, an equity-based numbers game that increased black presence in historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) and improved material and academic conditions in historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). Many universities have attempted to retune their curricula to include indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) and Afrocentric perspectives, with the question of what counts as de/colonial knowledge left unanswered.

The need for 'democratization of access' (A. J. Mbembe 2016, 30) alongside an increased awareness of digital inequality, literacy, and other epistemological and demographic barriers to access is also regarded as a key interest of decolonisation work. Of course, these engagements with decolonisation have barely disturbed the university's increasingly corporatised operational functioning organised around the principle of 'excellence' and a knowledge economy that drives funding and recognition. Scientific research is treated as superior to social research both in terms of journal impact factors and funding allocations, cementing a fidelity to 'colonial' forms of knowledge that privilege the objectivity of Cartesian dualisms and simultaneously 'other' forms of knowledge that are experiential, local or subjective. These and many other complexities require a nuanced and engaged approach, which includes reconceptualising what characterises 'the university' today, as well as how to 'decolonise' it (A. J. Mbembe 2016).

Epistemological decolonisation surfaces a tension in which a university, 'an authorized center of knowledge production' (Mamdani 2016, 69), must somehow use that knowledge to negate itself and, in that negating produce new ways of knowing that transcend the (colonial) project that brought it into being, including the colonial assumptions of accumulation and exploitation that have in many ways shaped modern knowledge. The concept of double critique is useful here in beginning to dismantle the assemblages by which the university characterises itself. However, it does not sufficiently open pathways of *beyond* by which we can think and act on dismantling, reassembling, refusing, and revitalising the academy as key to the decolonisation project.

In taking our critique *beyond* the routine assumptions of the closed categories of coloniality, we can also critique our own attempts at decolonisation, the hegemony of the decolonisation discourse within the academy, and the absence of a space for thinking *against* it. A useful avenue here is Jansen and Walters' (2022) study on South African universities, which explains the macro- and micro-technologies that disciplined the idea of

decolonisation in ways that parallel the discursive trajectory of 'emancipatory' human rights. They argue that, in responding to decolonisation, institutions deployed a range of tactics in order to manage and defuse a political crisis, 'including posturing, diluting, bureaucratising, disciplining, regulating, marginalising, and domesticating the radical curriculum idea' (ibid, 20). The net result of these institutional processes was to contain the 'threat' of radical change that challenged the established ideas, norms and values that underpin and give expression to the institutional curriculum.

In addition to this assessment, the question of decolonial knowledge does not, in programmatic terms, register in the epistemological imagination of the university. What makes this more challenging is that decolonisation frames view the knowledges on which they rest in absolutist terms. This has been the case for human rights as well. Thus, for us, it would appear that the arguments for the rights discourse to travel, intimately, with its radical critiques to continuously reinvent itself, drives the critical-as-*beyond* orientation towards decolonisation.

The current, relative 'silence' of decolonisation, nowadays expressed only in patchy programmatic work, would have been different, we argue, with embedded self- and external critique. Our proclivity as an academy for dogmatic and 'tagline' thinking plays a substantive role in how radical ideas are being offered to be governed. Yet, serious work on how these ideas result in generative intellectual and project work – such as *'Fires on the Margin'* (Keet, Rafaely, and Phuza forthcoming publication) or Soudien's (2023) thinking around Honig's (2013) 'holding environments' – within universities, globally, is still to be systematically explored. That is, though relatively limited, radical conceptions of human rights and decolonisation have found some programmatic expression in different forms across universities globally (Cargas and Mitoma 2019; Tibbitts and Keet 2023).

Comparing the university's approaches to decolonisation and human rights, respectively, a few observations are noteworthy. We discuss each of these in turn, focusing on the institutionalisation of radical ideas, decolonisation's failure to append itself to a global assemblage, the absence of self-criticality in both human rights and decolonisation discourse and finally, the focus on decolonisation as an epistemological rather than socio-historical project.

First, it is not clear where the institutionalising of radical ideas within universities will take us and whether such institutionalisation is desirable or possible. Foucault's (1972) reflections on the nature of knowledge through the concepts of *connaisance* and *savoir* are instructive, for they provide a distinction between the underlying structures by which knowledge is formed (what he terms the archaeology of knowledge, or s*avoir*) on the one hand, and the specific knowledges that emerge from knowing subjects (disciplinary knowledge, or *connaisance)* on the other. *Savoir* can also be read as the general knowledge that precedes *connaisance*. This distinction implies that a difficult route awaits the decolonisation of knowledge imperative, since that which is needed to pave the way – the general, underlying knowledge of *savoir* – and its 'planes of emergence, authorities of delimitation, or forms of specification' (Foucault, 1972, 47) has been brutally displaced by colonisation. Therefore, the history of knowledges as arranged through disciplines suggests that the

> decolonisation of knowledge [is] a near impossible task because the very terms for decolonisation are prefigured in the colonising knowledge project' and as such, decolonisation has not smelted through the 'existing rules of knowledge formation within the disciplines [or universities] themselves. (Keet 2014b, 25)

Though the idea of unruly and undisciplined knowledges is precisely what the epistemic project of decolonisation has in mind, its disciplinary take-up will be limited since it can only be written in analogy to 'the disciplines' in the way that the university is currently assembled. This constraint makes it difficult to imagine a knowledge project beyond the horizons of our accepted disciplinary formations, locking us into an ever-present and almost inescapable matrix of colonial reference points. The indigenous knowledge programme in South Africa is a case in point: despite massive investments, it has, with few exceptions, remained a disciplinary addendum. The work of Odora-Hoppers (2005) and Nabudere (see Osha 2018) are, amongst others, two examples that come close to programmatically advancing the idea of decolonisation into knowledge reformulations. In both cases, there is a focus on excavating *savoir* as a condition for decolonising disciplinary knowledge.

Following Gutting's (1989, 251) observation that *savoir* refers to the 'discursive conditions that are necessary for the development of *connaissance*', we argue that the emergence of human rights after 1948 was invested with vast reservoirs of informal knowledges. These knowledges, rooted in human suffering, cut across cultural and geographical contexts, which allowed for the formalisation of rights through human rights instruments and state-level ratifications. Yet, the associated disciplinary formations have been slow in taking off, except as subsections in the disciplines of law, political science, anthropology, and a few others. Although human rights discourse has enjoyed substantial influence in the higher education sector through the work of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other UN agencies, its impact on universities with regard to knowledge and praxes remains limited.

Second, the notion of decolonisation had a tenuous relationship with human rights in the post-World War II era that saw the formation of the UN and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Thus, when we, with an over-production of rights instruments, entered the 'age of rights' in the second part of the previous century, the decolonisation movement evolved in a politically sketchy association with the global human rights movement. The drive towards independence and democratic development of the colonies was more and more cast in the language of rights rather than decolonisation. This is despite the centrality of decolonisation in the Bandung Conference of Independence in 1955; and, though a perennial subtext of African development and intellectual work, decolonisation 'retreated' in the 1980s. It re-surfaced in substantive form at the beginning of the decolonial turn of the mid-2000s, with a pronounced material and epistemological 'attitude' articulable without recourse to a human rights framing for its intelligibility. This is, of course, a debatable assertion. As stated earlier, some would argue that the articulation between the frames of rights and decolonisation has always been at play. This claim is, contentious in our view, as evidence to the contrary suggests a weak, formalised uptake of decolonisation in higher education relative to that of rights. A cursory analysis of human rights instruments and world programmes, such as those on human rights education, does not support the contention

that rights and decolonisation have consistently shared the same linguistic universe. In fact, the rereading of human rights through a decolonial lens is a trend that has become more noticeable only after the decolonial turn (Liotta and Szpiga 2022; Maldonado-Torres 2017).

Third, ironically, the same aversion to critique – a key feature of dogma – from which the human rights religion historically suffers now characterises much of the predominantly university-based decolonisation movement over the last decade (see Keet et al. 2023). This has been one of our key discomforts, given that the centrality of critique in our work can only proceed from a basis of self-criticality. Okoth (2021) provides an insightful analysis of this trend in decolonisation as a critique *of* an/other without a well-defined internal critique of its own suppositions, whilst Mgqwashu figures decolonisation as a grand narrative 'in ways that silence (if not obliterate) smaller narratives' (2015, 1). Our experience in the human rights field suggests that this orientation – an absence of self-criticality – is a determining constraining factor in the way in which new formations seek disciplinary and institutional uptake. This may well be the case with decolonisation as well: a condition that can, nevertheless, easily be corrected.

Finally, the human rights field is a vast network of UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots civil society, academics, civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and so on, at a much deeper and broader scale than that of the decolonisation movement. Furthermore, human rights discourse collaborates with theory, law, policy, curriculum, schools, and university programmes, which is not the case for the decolonisation movement in its current form. In fact, the decolonisation movement has been accused of having an overwhelming focus on epistemology stemming predominantly from universities, museums, and arts institutions (Okoth 2021, 1), with very little connection to historical formations, experiences, or communities. So, it lacks the conditions for generating or drawing from general knowledge (*savoir)* as the underlying canvas of disciplinarity. Oddly, this lack arises despite the massive growth in knowledge excavations, writings, reflections, observations, programmes, conferences, seminars, and networks on decolonisation in higher education since the mid-2000s.

Human rights and decolonisation, as frames, diverged politically during the waves of independence of the 1950s and 1960s. The human rights discourse was 'clearly marginal' (Eckel 2010, 113) in the language of Africa and Asia during that time. 'To them, human rights served as a largely sporadic strategy of legitimizing their struggle against colonialism' (ibid), and for the colonisers, human rights 'never formed a dominant motivation for colonial retreat' (ibid). During this time, emerging ideas of independence and democratic development were being articulated in human rights terms, and the language of decolonisation took on a secondary position. Human rights theorists and practitioners may argue that decolonisation and human rights are subsumed into one language of freedom and emancipation; or that they are, at least, highly compatible (see, for instance, Hoffmann and Assy 2019). For decolonisation theorists and practitioners, however, human rights needs to be drastically rethought (see Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mignolo 2009).

The formalisation of human rights within the halls of the UN and transnational human rights agencies in NGOs does not reflect a twinning with decolonisation, as some would claim. The advantage here for decolonisation is that, in remaining unbound and not

(overly) disciplined, there is space for a critical language and praxis to surface and continuously be made and remade. This is not the case with human rights, in which work in a similar direction is more difficult due to the discursive investments in the concept of rights. We argue that the unruliness of decolonisation discourse provides space to be more inventive, especially when decolonisation, as a movement and politics, can co-travel with and process its critiques.

The relationship between human rights and decolonisation is a contested yet productive one, especially if such a correlation is framed in a language of criticality and non-dogmatism. That is, the language of critique should be the vernacular of these discourses. The same is true for the SDGs, which have nowadays emerged as the most dominant expression of the human rights regime. Within the formal language of the UN, the SDG agenda seeks 'to realize the human rights of all' (2015, preamble) and is firmly anchored in human rights principles and standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties (OHCHR, 2015). There is also a growing literature on the links between decolonisation and the SDGs (Lenton 2023; Porter and Cook 2023). Given these interplays, it may be helpful to further explore the SDGs in our attempt to develop an ecology of transformative discourses through the critical as *beyond.*

The sustainable development goals (SDGs)

As the most recent instantiation of human rights discourse, the SDGs are growing in dominance within academic agenda-setting. We argue that the way in which the global university has handed itself over to the SDGs presents an example of this type of limited critical orientation that is perhaps not 'university-like' and is far removed from the idea of the university as a social critic. The SDG ideology in universities is making rapid inroads as the sustainability discourse is increasingly hailed as the 'new' emancipator in an almost messianic language. However, rather than deciphering *decolonisation* as one of the possible prerequisites for revitalising the concept of sustainability (as a counterweight to predation and cultures of accumulation) with environmental, socio-economic, and cultural significance, the logical architecture of the SDGs seems to work *against* decolonisation and *towards* the neoliberal impulses of the human rights discourse more generally.

Viewed as a global framework for addressing pressing challenges and increasing awareness about complex social issues, in many respects, the SDGs seem beyond critique, underpinned by a set of values so deeply embedded in modern life that even thinking against them feels impossible, immoral, and wrong. As such, they have emerged as a totalising social logic that mobilises the language of emergency, crisis, and survival. Yet, they rest on the same notion of progress that produced the crisis they have been mobilised to solve and do not question the type of economic growth which underwrites them.

The SDGs, which came into effect in 2016, are considered a global roadmap for development in the twenty-first century. Their instantiation was understood as a product of a growing recognition of the deleterious effects of unchecked economic growth on the environment and socio-economic inequalities and the need for rethinking the nature and direction of human progress. The modernisation paradigm of the 1980s, which assumed that economic growth was the antidote to poverty (Hove 2004), has been

disrupted by the massive inequalities and environmental degradation wrought by relentless economic advancement.

The discourse of development, framed in terms of market-based relations (Weber 2017), has been realised as causing profound and unsustainable environmental degradation – unsustainable in the sense that market expansion driven by capitalism 'impairs or destroys the social and environmental conditions on which it relies' (Hove 2004, 51). The introduction of the SDGs may be pessimistically seen as a way of prioritising economic growth and expansion as core values of the twenty-first century. Their wholesale adoption through an assemblage of institutions, including universities, gestures to their power as an ideological frame that recycles the conventional logic of growth not as the cause of the present crises but as its only solution. The assumptions of progress that steer the SDGs remain firmly aligned to predatory 'capital accumulation in the neo-liberal era' (Stein and De Oliveira Andreotti 2016, 173) by which the modern/global imaginary of the university is produced. This imaginary is both epistemic and political, as 'useful' and 'funding-based' forms of knowing and research have become those that advance SDGs; a refrain that now litters the pages of university plans and statements. Yet, this explicitly neoliberal agenda is one of the central critiques of the SDGs from a decolonial viewpoint. And correspondingly, one may argue that the SDG discourse is key in displacing decolonisation efforts within the university.

The discourse of human rights that had taken hold in the 1900s provided a normative framework for interpreting social, political, economic, and material reality. As a 'deep structure' of the contemporary worldview, it provides the parameters with which we navigate the questions of our existence. Notions of human rights have always relied on a set of 'givens' (Peterson 1990) that are themselves tied to social, political, and economic realities. As such, our inherited assumptions of human rights are invested with ideologies concerning what we as humans are entitled to simply as a consequence of being human (Chwaszcza 2010), and many of these rights are premised on the notion of progress and development. Modernisation theory, which had driven the activities of the post-war Western world, had some interesting propositions: for example, it assumed that poverty was caused by a lack of resources rather than their inequitable distribution. It also assumed that environmental degradation was a result of poverty and poor countries' inability to produce and consume in environmentally responsible ways. As such, if 'developing' (i.e. poor) countries would simply increase their 'development', the increase in growth (i.e. market expansion) would solve poverty through the increase in per capita income, while the social and environmental challenges, consequences of poverty, would automatically resolve themselves (Weber 2017). In this way, development was considered a 'given' that was contested only by 'the "backwardness" and traditionalism of [certain] societies' (Hove 2004, 49). In this equation, the concept of growth has morphed to replace the language of human rights (Jacob 1994), suggesting a competing deep structure in which all human rights to life-sustaining needs are most efficiently realised through a market-based policy solution, which is itself premised on growth's linkages to market forces and their stabilising tendencies. This is the 'market episteme' (McMichael 2009, 247) whose logic has captured and commodified human rights and made commodities of public services, natural resources, and human needs. For Baxi (2008), both human rights and the SDGs make up this human rights market.

Development theory, and its embeddedness within the market episteme, has always placed economic expansion at the centre of its logic and activities, while effectively severing the linkages between poverty or environmental degradation and their exacerbation by the relational processes of development themselves (Weber 2017). Forty years on, the catastrophic environmental degradation and increasing poverty worldwide suggest that the market may not be the solution to global socio-economic inequality.

Sustainable development was introduced by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987) as an alternative model of international development which acknowledged, and sought to mitigate, the linkages between development, socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation. Sustainable development thus brings together two 'old enemies' (Escobar 1996, 328) or contradictory imperatives: economic expansion and environmental protection. Although this model identified the negative impact of economic growth on the environment, it failed to similarly interrogate the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation, leaving intact inherited Malthusian assumptions about the nature of poverty, the processes required to eradicate global inequality, and the relationship between grinding poverty and environmental degradation. While traditional development theory had relied on the market to ensure equitable developmental trajectories worldwide and was driven by the focus on 'gratification of our present needs at any cost' (Stefanovic 2000, 3–4), Sustainable Development, increasingly popularised in the 1990s, urges us to 'meet the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations' (WCED, 1987, 16). Sustainable Development, in maintaining the market episteme as a deep structure, addresses the short-sightedness of previous international development policies without tackling the growth imperative that underpins the nature of development itself.

The SDGs, from 2016 onwards, replaced the Millennium Development Goals (Weber 2014), which had been heavily critiqued for their lack of attention to sustainable development and policy implementation, among other flaws. The SDGs provided a new framework that engaged with the goals of eradicating poverty and ensuring equitable global development while also acknowledging the need for a sustainable approach that would not endanger the future in pursuit of the present. According to the UN (n.d.), the SDGs were created through an inclusive process involving the UN Open Working Group and public consultation. This process began in 2012 with representatives of 70 countries, 88 national consultations and 11 thematic consultations, which established the varying perspectives around priorities and goals. The 17 SDGs are said to link economic, social, and environmental objectives through the 169 targets that provide a universal blueprint for comprehensive and shared action.

Although the SDGs were widely welcomed as a global, inclusive, and responsible approach to the challenges encountered in the twenty-first century, they have also been critiqued as consisting of neoliberal and commercial interests that work more efficiently to defer the problems of environmental degradation while privileging the interests of a wealthy elite. As a framework that continues to privilege the market episteme, it fails to grapple with the fundamental tension between economic expansion and environmental protection, prioritising neoliberal assumptions whose normativity is then used as the basis for agenda setting as well as policy development and implementation. Viewed in this way, the SDGs are an assemblage of 'institutions, development discourses,

landscapes, and energy infrastructures that are disciplined and held together to materialise and legitimise particular interpretations of sustainable development' (Hope 2021, 208).

A cornerstone of the 2030 Agenda relies on research to produce the technology and innovations that will optimise development and make it sustainable. Universities, as knowledge producers, have consequently been mobilised for this purpose. Globally, universities have been incorporating the SDG framework to guide their policies, research, operations, and educational programmes; some even view it as addenda to their strategic plans. The SDGs have emerged as normative frameworks in universities, not only because 'sustainability' is currently a bandwagon in higher education but because the SDGs align with university missions and values. The SDG framework allows institutions to concretely express and implement their values in a way that meets stakeholder expectations regarding social and sustainability responsibility. Formally integrating the SDGs into strategy, mission, key performance indicators, and reporting mechanisms allows universities to frame and measure their social and sustainability impact in a globally recognised manner and position themselves in the global sustainability agenda. In addition, the appeal of the UN-endorsed global SDG framework creates research and teaching opportunities. Research agendas can be aligned with the SDGs, creating interdisciplinary collaborations to develop teaching, learning and research around the global sustainability challenges. In short, the SDGs create a normative framework for social and sustainable responsibility that aligns values, strategies, activities, and metrics across institutions globally.

Proponents of the SDGs generally rely on the idea of a transnational consensus of 'democracy' as a similarly totalising ideal, far removed from the Zizekian insight that 'democracy is the form our attachment to Capital takes' (Dean 2005, 155). The formulation of the SDGs can thus be perceived as an incorporation of the critique of capital that perverts the challenges aimed at neoliberal logics. Universities are key in producing these facilitating discourses, and a pessimistic interpretation may well conclude that this lock-stock-and-barrel approach to the SDGs is precisely aimed at neutralising these critiques by enfolding them into the SDG framework. As such, the assumptions underpinning the SDGs, so neatly embedded in an elevator-pitch wording, are available to, and in need of, closer examination. We focus here on three key issues that should caution their wholesale incorporation into higher education research agendas.

The first and broadest critique is levelled against the language of the SDGs. The vocabulary, words and concepts that make up the 17 SDGs and their targets are a 'rhetorical shield' (Hove 2004, 51) that conceals the economically driven aspirations of the initiative. The goals represent a 'loose concept of an ideal situation' (ibid, 52), and the UN itself has described the SDGs 'as aspirational and global' (2015, 3) rather than as, for example, a commitment to guaranteeing universal basic needs to all individuals. Proponents of both radicalist and reformist approaches will find voice in the watered-down language of the SDGs, whose assemblage resignifies nature, planet Earth and human existence itself.

In the paradigm of sustainable development, 'investors' become 'providers of development' (Weber 2017, 410), and the provision of life-sustaining needs is reinterpreted in terms of 'growth' rather than as a 'commons'. The 'ideological transformation of "services" from fundamentally social relations that are embedded within communities to commercialised commodities traded within an international market place' (Kelsey 2003, 267) represents an elemental shift in the reconceptualisation of basic needs as

commodifiable. This reframing exposes the endurance of development's privileging of economic growth and its totalising logic of commodification, over any kind of commitment to equitable distribution of such goods and services, as the pathway to reducing inequality.

Furthermore, the SDGs' commitment to 'leave no one behind' (UN 2015, 4) presents a façade of inclusivity but ominously introduces an element of compulsion in its suggestion that 'no one will be/ought to be excluded from this agenda' (Weber 2017, 409). This insistence on a *global* development agenda is one reason that universities should be extremely wary of wholesale alignment with the SDGs, and would do well to use the opportunity to reinforce their status as a public commons, a service irreducible to the commodification of the SDG program.

Another critique, already raised here, is the SDGs' failure to engage meaningfully with existing critiques of (sustainable) development, of growth as a norm in development agendas, and of the paradoxes of economic expansion and environmental protection inherent in the notion of sustainable development. Current agendas leave unaddressed the role of development in global inequality and the climate crisis, the ethnocentricity and anthropocentrism of the SDGs, and the neoliberal interests embedded in its normative underpinnings. The SDGs do not problematise the excessive consumption characteristic of the 'developed' world, and the unsustainable patterns of production and accumulation that are key drivers of economic degradation are concealed in the logic of the SDGs in which the market, economic growth, and increased expansion are framed as the antidote to the current climate crisis; in which the problem is recycled as the solution (McMichael 2009). Again, universities should be a site of resistance and challenge to this neoliberal project rather than allying with its aims.

Finally, the mass mobilisation of social institutions into the sustainable development agenda should give the university pause to consider the ways in which institutions, infrastructures, discourses, states, NGOs, civil society organisations and the private sector are recruited into an assemblage that disciplines and depoliticises the limits of sustainable development in order to neutralise its transformative capabilities.

Our argument is that, as the SDG framework has already summoned the institutions of money and power into its logic, the university reads its sustainability and survival as attached to an uncritical alignment to the SDGs. That is, an entire global system with diverse sub-systems is now orbiting the SDGs with its own ranking system and guidebooks, platforms of massive research and other SDG-related funding instruments. This prescriptive framework is a far cry from what a university or university system should aspire to. Similar to human rights and decolonisation at their apex, the SDG discourse tends to converge around a self-referential language of justification that puts self-critique at a distance. Ironically, as we argue throughout this paper, it is precisely this distance from critique that weakens both the discourse (of rights, decolonisation, and the SGDs) and that which it is trying to achieve. In this respect, the '*beyond*' in *beyond decolonisation* may sublate this distance much more effectively than both human rights and the SDGs since 'decolonisation' appears to have no formal framers and is not yet saturated with ideological meanings, thereby protecting its radical potential. As such, we view decolonisation as a potentially useful hook for rethinking human rights and sustainability and for reimagining the university's role in relation to *savoir* more broadly: a (self) critical traveller that reflects the tensions and hegemonic impulses of its society rather than aligning itself

within a particular frame, thereby rendering itself able to encircle, to think otherwise, to think *beyond*.

Conclusion

In this article, we consider the trajectory of human rights within universities over the past three decades. We argue that the human rights framework provides a useful interpretive scheme for making sense of the decolonisation journey in South African institutions and for engaging the capital-driven hegemony of the SDGs in global higher education. We, of course, cannot escape the production of our own neo-liberal subjectivities as we attempt to write ourselves out of the dark. For this very reason, the self-critical stance is a central principle, not only for us as individuals but for the entire enterprise of the critical project. This is our preferred way of conceptualising the critical as *beyond*. In a sense, we argue for a perpetual opening of closed categories so as to refuse the foreclosure of radical renewal.

Our target has been the way in which we in the academy are prone to the uncritical assimilation of prevailing social ideas. In South Africa, we have had a number of cycles post-1994: post-Apartheid reconstruction, transformative constitutionalism, reconciliation and transitional justice, Africanisation, human rights, decolonisation, techno-science and, most recently, the SDGs. It is not simply that the 'uncritical' is anti-intellectual and anti-university. Rather, what is at stake is that our interpretive horizons, our very imagination of what the university could be, are locked into these frames. And, tellingly, this imprisonment of the imagination functions ideologically, granting legitimacy to the structuring of higher education in neoliberal times. Here, alternatives are made unthinkable as these frames are disciplined to project the present university into the future. Its tracks are laid. Nevertheless, the critical as *beyond* is meant to respond to precisely this impossibility, as we have already argued, to produce openings of regenerations.

The possibilities of regeneration through critique are one of our watermark propositions as we bring human rights and decolonisation into conversation with one another and reflect on the different trajectories they have followed within the higher education sector. We note their convergences with the SDGs, presented as beyond critique and as an assemblage of closed categories. This foreclosure produces the SDGs as one of the most troublesome discourses of our time, exercising a stranglehold on the imagination of higher education, with key implications for the role and purpose of the university in contemporary times: *not* because its ideals are not worth pursuing, but because its central assumptions around people, planet, and prosperity align with the logics by which the current crises are produced. Disclosing the way these assumptions arrange social, cultural, and economic life is key in the decolonial critique of the SDGs (and human rights more broadly) from the *beyond* vantage point. This critique, as the dialect of these powerful frames, will, inevitably, explore the flourishing of racism in contemporary societies across the globe and its interface with human rights, decolonisation, and the SDGs in its new forms. The *in-common* of which A. Mbembe (2023, 125) speaks, rooted in mutuality and solidarity as preconditions for tackling the crises of our time, suggests a renewed focus on the fight against various forms of racism (ibid).

A key objective of this article has been to explore the interconnectedness between three powerful discourses in universities – human rights, decolonisation, and the SDGs – from the vantage point of the critical as *beyond*. We argue that these dominant

frames, systematically set up outside the reach of rigorous critique, uncritically occupy normative positions that produce sets of truth packages to which universities tend to bow. Whilst such an orientation weakens the value of the frames themselves, it also undermines the university's role as a social conscience and critic. Deploying critique as a language of translation across these discourses, we argue for the critical as *beyond* as the vernacular of engagement by which we can work against the production of new dogmas that masquerade as critical praxes. To be clear, for us, it is not the possible value of these frames that is in question; rather, value should derive from criticality so as to inscribe within itself a resistance towards totalising logics on the one hand and an alignment with renewal on the other.

As we advance the critical as *beyond,* as a drive for unburdening us from circular argumentations with no alternatives on offer, it seems that a decolonisation framework capable of exploring its own critiques and attuned to its own contingent conditions may provide openings for a productive critique and renewal of human rights. It is also our best option for turning the SDG discourse on its head, to disclose its dead ends and its cul-de-sac; and to critique its most fundamental assumptions. The critical as *beyond* is also required to convert the neoliberal critique of the university and these discourses into programmatic work so that we may practically work against that which we critique. Finally, and as stated earlier, the critical as *beyond,* in this instance, attempts to provide a scaffolding language for engaging with ruling ideas within our universities.

Notes

1. The idea of the critical as beyond is derived from Keet's (2018) speech, *Double critique; Critique and Its Double*.
2. These are: no poverty; no hunger; good health; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; renewable energy; good jobs and economic growth; innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption; climate actions; life below water; life on land; peace and justice; and partnerships for the goals. See the full document at https://sdgs.un.org/goals [accessed 17 June 2016].

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