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AUTHORS:

Jan Botha¹
Peter Vale²
Henk van Rinsum³

AFFILIATIONS:

¹Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
²Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa
³Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Peter Vale

EMAIL:

petercvale@gmail.com

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Utrecht University; exploration, colonial knowledge: A ‘Civilizing Mission’. Interview with Henk van Rinsum

Significance:

This piece relays an interview with Henk van Rinsum (retired from Utrecht University). In the interview, the idea of the university as a detached space connected with the notion of the alleged objectivity of science is challenged by an “older white Dutchman attempting to offer insights on colonialism”. The interview explores the colonial historical development of a university in Western Europe as it finds its place within the entanglements of Christianity, capitalism, commerce, colonialism, and civilisation. The interview calls for a sensitive dialogue on issues of decolonisation. Are we prepared to address the ills of colonialism, given that we still seem to live under the influence of coloniality, including in higher education?

Henk van Rinsum (retired from Utrecht University and 2021–2024 Research Fellow at CREST, Stellenbosch University) is a curious creature in the world of universities. For one thing, his professional career was primarily in academic administration, not in the academy. In addition, his educational training in history and anthropology interested him in the world of institutions of higher education and research. And thirdly, early dabbling in theology gave Dr van Rinsum an understanding of the (near) spiritual place of the university in changing times and different spaces.

While on a study visit to Stellenbosch University recently, Van Rinsum spoke to Jan Botha, Emeritus Professor at CREST and Peter Vale, Emeritus Professor and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, about his recent book¹, *Universiteit Utrecht en Koloniale kennis—Bestuderen, Bemeten en Beleren sinds 1636*.

The book is now also published under the English title *Utrecht University and Colonial Knowledge; Exploration, Exploitation and the Civilizing Mission since 1636*² and is available open access at OAPEN (oapen.org). It is empirically rich, drawing on a largely unexplored archive at Utrecht University and a 40-year career.

What interested you in ‘European’ knowledge of the colonisation process?

For several decades, I was employed at the Bureau Buitenland (International Office) of Utrecht University in the field of ‘development cooperation’, which was all the rage in Europe after the Cold War ended. Increasingly, however, I felt uncomfortable about the notion of ‘development collaboration’ because I realised it was underpinned by what Mignolo called “The Dark Side of Western Modernity”³.

In 2000 I ended my work at the International Office. In 2001, I defended my dissertation ‘Slaves of Definition; in Quest of the Unbeliever and the Ignoramus’⁴; a scholarly reflection on ‘development’. I wrote:

The development of higher education and research in Africa can best be interpreted as a process of prescriptive construction, or imposition, of an identity. In this process, Western science, being an intrinsic part of the processes of colonisation and globalisation, developed from a local, culturally and historically determined, contingent ethnoscience to a hegemonic discourse. This hegemonic ambition is based on a fundamental dichotomy ‘developed’ (and therefore modern) versus ‘not (yet)-developed’ (and therefore still primitive or traditional). ‘We’ are developed and therefore ‘the Other’ needs to be developed, after our image. ‘We’ in the West need this dichotomy. [...] The dichotomy unfolds between ‘us’, believer, messenger, academic, and ‘the Other’, unbeliever, receiver and ignoramus.⁴(p.122–124)

My critical sentiments about engaging in ‘development cooperation’ sparked a curiosity to delve into the colonial past through the perspective offered by my alma mater and employer, Utrecht University, established in 1636.

This interest coincided with the increasingly vigorous and theoretically rich ‘decolonisation move’ in higher education studies, in which South African scholars play such a prominent role.

The book is a hybrid. It is the story of how the Global North ‘co-created’ (so to speak) the Global South through the power of a Northern epistemology.

However, this is also my life story. The writing process was unsettling: How relevant (or insightful) would the narrative of an older white Dutchman attempting to offer insights into colonialism be?

Can you say something about the theoretical framework used in the book?

Diverse theoretical models interpret a range of colonial positions, beginning with the **Diffusionist (or Modernisation) model** proposed by Walt Rostow’s⁵ *Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) and George Basella’s⁶ *The Spread of Western Science* (1967). The nucleus of this approach is that science and its development are essential elements of modernisation.

Then, I turn to the **Dependence model** developed by Andre Gunder Frank⁷ (1929–2005) and Johan Galtung⁸ (1930–2024) and the Metropole (the colonisers) versus Periphery (colonialised) nexus. Using Karl Marx as their

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point of entry, Frank and Galtung viewed science as an instrument of imperial control and exploitation.

Later, I was influenced by the post-structuralist thinking of Edward Said's⁹ (1935–2003) *Orientalism* (1978) and Valentin Mudimbe's¹⁰ (1941–) *The Invention of Africa* (1988). Here, (Western-based) science appears in the guise of cultural imperialism. Despite the criticism against Said, his power–knowledge nexus remains very convincing. It points towards Walter Mignolo's³ notion of 'the dark side of Western modernity' (2011).

This listing of ideas and practices neatly mirrors Utrecht University's colonial history. However, this was only possible because it operated initially within a **networked conception of 'the empire'** and, over time, within the idea of 'the international'. It is sobering to remember that the inequalities of power within these networks have not disappeared, and these fuel contemporary struggles over different modalities of knowledge.

A conventional view has been that the development of the modern world system was a diffusion of Western cultural and intellectual traditions. From this perspective, a dominant intellectual tradition commenced on the European continent, and, over time, it traversed the globe as part of Europe's expansion. During this process, other knowledge traditions were 'swallowed', as it were, by the eager maw of Western science.

The field of global intellectual history significantly revised this understanding. Rens Bod's¹¹ book, *A World of Patterns: The History of Knowledge* (2022), discusses the human search for patterns and principles in the world. This world encompasses multiple scientific cultures with extensive historical legacies. Arthur O. Lovejoy¹² stated that ideas are "the most migratory entities in the world". It was not a mere diffusion of Western science, nor a one-way flow from the West, but rather a convergence and often a clash of diverse intellectual traditions.

What story does the book tell?

From the mid-17th century, 'scientists' affiliated with Utrecht University were connected to the Dutch colonies in Indonesia, Suriname, and (South) Africa in various ways. Sometimes these scholars worked in the colonies, and sometimes they processed materials that were transported from the colonies to Utrecht. At times, Utrecht's academics wrote about the colonies – their people, religion, language, and the like.

The first phase of this process, which I call 'Confession and Conversion', related to the clergy trained in Utrecht from 1636 onwards. Some ministers ventured as missionaries to the colonies to serve in VOC churches. At the same time, students from the colonies (mainly of a mixed ethnicity) came to Utrecht to study theology. In the second half of the 19th century, dozens of young white men from South Africa went to Utrecht to study theology, including Andrew Murray, Johannes Henoch Neethling, John Murray, and Nicolaas Hofmeyr. One may argue that Stellenbosch University (established as an independent university in 1918), with its predecessors (the Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church established in 1959, the Stellenbosch Gymnasium and College established in 1866, and since 1886 Victoria College), was conceptualised in the Common Rooms of Utrecht. In 1905, D.F. Malan – who was to become the country's fourth prime minister – did his doctorate at Utrecht University. In 1936, on its 300th anniversary, Utrecht University received a sculpture of the Boer leader Paul Kruger – interestingly, it is still on display in the Academy Building. It was gifted by students from the University of Pretoria who studied in Utrecht.^{13–15} See also the short review of the book on Utrecht University and colonial knowledge, including the reference to Van Rinsum's book on Utrecht and South Africa by Erik van den Bergh¹⁶.

Simultaneously, a keen interest in the new world was underway. This is the phase of 'Exploration and Classification'. As Sandra Harding says: "The world was added as a laboratory to modern science in Europe through European expansion."¹⁷(p.58) This collection and classification process also characterised the study of humans (in anthropology and related fields of study). In that context, the discourse of Western superiority originated – 'we' are developed, 'they' not (yet). The title of my book includes a word that I find hard to translate into English: *beleren*. It involves patronisingly lecturing, lecturing to children in the sense of 'de les lezen', prescribing, and admonishing.

Cartesian rationality combined with the obsession with taxonomy and classification resulted in the development of the concept of race with the white race at the top. From reading the *Book of Nature*, based on Western superiority, there is a concise line to the practice of slavery. The modernity of an alleged universalism was to suppress the epistemologies in (what we now call) the Global South.

The phase of 'Exploration and Classification' was transformed during the 19th century into an era of 'Exploitation and Experimentation'. In the colonies, capitalist economic development of plantations, including sugar and coffee, required expertise from academics engaged in experimental research. In this manner, the university became increasingly entangled in the so-called five Cs: Christianity, capitalism, commerce, colonialism and civilisation.

In the early 20th century, a concept known as an 'ethical policy' emerged in relation to the Dutch colonial enterprise. This policy aimed to uplift the inhabitants of the colonies while maintaining the dominance of the imperial project. However, concerns arose within colonial business circles regarding the stability and durability of the Dutch empire.

In response to these shifting theories and practices, an educational programme was established in Utrecht for senior civil servants in the colonies. This programme was rooted in a conservative-liberal and Christian-historical ideology, focusing on the preservation of the colonies. At times, this approach even showed tendencies towards fascism. During this period, referred to as 'Educating and Controlling' (1925–1950), this initiative received substantial financial support from the oil and sugar industries, earning the Indological Faculty the nickname 'Oil Faculty'. Once again, Utrecht University found itself enmeshed in a complex web of ideology, capital, and education.

Interestingly, it was suggested by some officials of the 'Oil Faculty' that this educational programme of what they called the 'Utrechtse Koloniale School' might also be useful in assisting the Boers in South Africa in maintaining control.

The final phase of the book explores 'Development Cooperation'. This phase continued the 'ethical policy' approach of uplifting 'the other' from the Western scientists' privileged position.

Tracking the colonial past of a university located in a former imperial country such as the Netherlands from a position of Western superiority enabled me to reflect on the development and role of science(s) – and, obviously, the university – in global relations. Subsequently, I raise the question of the consequences that shedding a colonial yoke has on the role of science(s) and universities in our present time.

How do we go from 'legacies of the past' to 'lessons for the future'?

Looking at the colonial history of Utrecht University, I observe that the development of sciences, including health sciences, geology, botany, anatomy, and physical anthropology, benefited tremendously from the process of exploration, extraction and exploitation in colonial history. At the same time, local knowledge systems were marginalised and pushed to the periphery.

Universities in the Global South are currently facing demands to break free from dominant (read Western) knowledge modalities. Illustrative of this were the developments during 2015 and 2016 at the University of Cape Town, which led to the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. Neither those discussions nor the activities related to the decolonisation of knowledge ended with that: it even led to calls for 'the fall of science'.

But what about the status of universities in the Global North? Is it possible for Western universities to undergo a process of 'decolonisation' by shedding their facade of superiority and engaging in genuine collaboration with people from various cultural backgrounds and different regions of the world?

What would be the consequences of such a process for the 'normal' academic episteme of a university like Utrecht University? Should we not consider differentiation based on different academic disciplines? Take, for example, a subject like African Studies. Clearly, this field should

feature substantial scholarly contributions from Africa. I intentionally used the term 'substantial' because I anticipate valuable dialogue on these matters – the underlying point being that Africa is interconnected with the rest of the world.

The issue of what belongs and what is not, becomes more of a challenge to decolonise in a discipline such as molecular cell biology. After all, laboratory experiments in such fields are inherently objective and do not attribute significance to the gender, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics of the researcher. Or do they? It is increasingly evident that even in seemingly 'objective' domains like medicine, the perspectives and experiences of different demographic groups can significantly impact research outcomes. For example, studies have revealed that medical research often defaults to the white male as the norm, potentially overlooking nuances in health outcomes for women, children, or individuals from diverse backgrounds. This realisation underscores the intricate interplay between scientific research and its social and cultural context. Research and education transcend mere technical pursuits, being deeply enmeshed within broader social, economic, and historical frameworks. Consequently, all stakeholders in the scientific enterprise must cultivate a profound sensitivity to these multifaceted dimensions, acknowledging and engaging with cultural, social, economic, epistemological, and historical distinctions to foster equitable and inclusive knowledge production.

This perspective is reinforced by the understanding that we live in a world of increasing differentiation and diversity. Increasingly, transnational communities are emerging, also within what were once considered 'enlightened' metropolises. Influential thinkers from the Global South have made this point. So, Arjun Appadurai¹⁸ (1949–) in *Modernity at Large* discusses a "diasporic public", while Kwame Anthony Appiah¹⁹ (1954–) explores "cosmopolitan identities". Thus, it becomes imperative for a 'Western' institution like Utrecht to strengthen its relationships with universities on other continents and in other cultural contexts. This is not to 'develop' them but rather to engage in a genuinely critical dialogue that allows mutual development alongside partners possessing distinct identities.

However, another challenging perspective of decolonisation should unite the universities of the Global South and the Global North. In 2012, with my fellow anthropologist Wil Pansters²⁰, I used Habermas to analyse the university's "colonisation of lifeworld by system". In the "lifeworld", people find the resources required to make sense of society and their respective journeys through it, including culture, institutions and socialisation. The "lifeworld" is thus responsible for society's symbolic reproduction, which carries hope for the future. Opposed to this "lifeworld", Habermas positions "system", governed by the imperatives of government and economy. In line – may I say – with capitalist practices, the transformation of the hierarchical and bureaucratic model of university governance – some call this 'academic rule' – into a 'market model', which is said to be flexible, and dynamic, has emerged. It draws its legitimacy from an emphasis on management principles anchored in accountability. The result is a constant attempt to quantify performance as a quality measure while ranking and rating this through self-selection. However, its critics argue that efficiency, constant accountability, and Foucauldian forms of control make it impossible for the university to function as a 'real' academic or intellectual place.

Decolonisation means, for every university, including Utrecht University, the urgent need to search for a new public space in a new social constellation with a greater critical cultural diversity regarding gender, skin colour, origin, nationality, and the like. We must do this, recognising this is not the starting point of the diffusion of our knowledge system – thus maintaining the mask of superiority – but confident that only different intersections of knowledge will inspire the urgency of education and research.

Declarations

We have no competing interests to declare. We have no AI or LLM use to declare. All authors read and approved the final version.

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