

# Archipélie

## “Decolonizing academia” in Norway after #RhodesMustFall <sup>1</sup>

Ketil Fred Hansen

### References

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### ABSTRACTS

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Compared with the student initiated #RhodesMustFall in South Africa, the public debate on “decolonizing academia” in Norway was mainly a debate among faculty. Most voices opposed the need of such a movement in an anti-colonial and social democracy like Norway. This article first demonstrates Norway’s former colonial complicity, both outside and inside Norway. While official Norway recognises its internal colonial past (towards the indigenous Sámi peoples) and its multicultural presence (due to immigration), official Norway still refuses to admit Norwegian participation in any form of external, imperialistic colonisation.

Then, finding that only five out of 443 texts on the curriculum in social sciences at Norwegian teacher’s education were written by authors connected to the Global South,

and that five out of nine teacher education programs in Norway was not represented by a single author from the Global South, this article examines Norway's colonial complicity and argues that "decolonizing academia" is highly relevant.

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### MOTS-CLÉS

décolonisation, Norvège, Scandinave, monde académique, #RhodesMustFall, diversité, curriculum, études sociales

### KEYWORDS

decolonizing academia, decolonizing university, #RhodesMustFall, diversity, curriculum, social studies, Norway

## OUTLINE

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# Introduction

- 1 No doubt inspired by the 2015 student-initiated movement in South Africa known as #RhodesMustFall,<sup>2</sup> the Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH),<sup>3</sup> voted in favour of a resolution to 'decolonize higher education' at their annual meeting in 2018.<sup>4</sup> The resolution stated that: 'within the curriculum, the teaching and the research [at universities and university colleges in Norway], diversity is needed to avoid reproducing a one-sided and Western epistemology. [...] Teacher education plays a particularly important role in the dissemination of knowledge and should therefore have a stronger focus on norm-critical and multicultural pedagogy and intersectionality.'<sup>5</sup>
- 2 A few weeks later, the Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO), arranged a fully booked seminar entitled 'Decolonize Academia'. The organizing researchers at PRIO, Ida Birkevad and Cindy Horst, claimed that 'Without systematic efforts to decolonize academia, we are missing important perspectives. The research we do, our findings and conclusions – about causes of conflict, connections between inequalities and conflict, social exclusion – will simply not be true'<sup>6</sup> (Birkevad & Horst, 2018).
- 3 These two events sparked off a long-lasting public debate on decolonization within universities in Norway. The heftiest debate was concentrated in the two or three months following the PRIO seminar in June 2018 and included numerous professors and students from a variety of subjects across many universities. The debate was reignited when SAIH launched its 50-page guide to decolonizing academia in early 2020,<sup>7</sup> but then it lay dormant for close to two years until, in December 2021, the public broadcast radio station NRK launched a series of 13 hour-long history podcasts introduced as 'Norwegian history seen from a Sámi perspective'.<sup>8</sup> Though the discussions this time received less attention and involved fewer people than the first round, a heated debate followed in online edited forums and newspapers focusing on decolonization, identity politics and the Sámi. For the first time the Norwegian indigenous people, the Sámi, were centre stage in the decolonization debate in Norway.

- 4 This article deals with 'decolonizing academia' in Norway. First, as part of a curriculum diversity check to see whether the curriculum needs to be decolonized, I scrutinize authors of the social studies curriculum in Norwegian teacher education. Norway's colonial complicity, in the context of its image as a small, humanitarian state focusing on equality and human rights, is explained, before I go on to describe issues central to the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa, as well as elucidating why some of them are not directly relevant in Norway. Finally, the main arguments put forward in the public debate on decolonizing academia in Norway are presented and discussed.

## 1. Testing the need to decolonize the curriculum: social studies in the Norwegian teacher education programme

- 5 As a professor in social studies at a Norwegian teacher education programme myself, I thought it would be of interest to see whether the curriculum really needed to be decolonized. I collected and scrutinized the curricula of nine teacher education programmes in social studies in Norway, randomly selected out of the 19 that exist in the country. As I had no time or wish to read the roughly 30,000 pages of curriculum content included altogether in the nine programmes offering a total of 540 ECTS in social studies within teacher education programmes in order to determine if they were written within a Western epistemological paradigm, I decided on a shortcut. I scrutinized the authors of the entire curriculum, dispersed among 340 articles or chapters and 103 entire textbooks, with the aim of determining whether they met one of the six principles included in University College London's *Inclusive Curriculum Health Check*: 'Have reading lists and resources that contain a diverse range of authors including those from different ethnicities, from outside the UK [and from non-academic sources where relevant].'<sup>9</sup>
- 6 In two of the universities, the entire curriculum within social studies was written in Norwegian, by Norwegian authors. Among the seven others, altogether 70 texts on the curriculum were written in English and 70 scholars were non-Norwegian. It should be noted that it is only coincidence that the two figures are

the same: some of the English texts were written by Norwegian scholars, and at the same time some of the texts by the non-Norwegian scholars were translated into Norwegian. So far, the picture did not appear to be not too bad: my first glance suggested that the need to decolonize the curriculum was not as urgent as SAIH had stated, if out of 443 texts on the curriculum, 70 were written by non-Norwegians. However, looking more closely at these texts, the vast majority of them – 62 – were written by scholars from the Anglo-Saxon world, including some Swedish and Danish authors.<sup>10</sup> From elsewhere in Europe, one French, one Spanish and one Serbian scholar each had one article on the total curriculum.

- 7 Only five texts out of 443 were written by scholars from Latin America, Africa or Asia. In fact, five out of nine teacher education programmes in social studies in Norway had not a single author originating from or strongly connected to the Global South on their curriculum. The other four included very short articles or extracts of chapters in their curriculum, totalling 78 pages. Guyanese Walter Rodney's *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (1973), from which short extracts were included, and Iranian scholar Adreed Dawisha (educated in London and working in Miami) were the only two scholars from the Global South represented in the curricula as sole authors of a text. Other authors on the curricula connected to the Global South – two Chinese and one Russian – were co-authoring with one or more scholars from the Global North. Not a single scholar from any African country was represented.
- 8 On a 2018 visit to Oslo from University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, distinguished Cameroonian professor Achille Mbembe declared: 'I feel sorry for every young Norwegian who can pass through a full university programme in Norway without ever reading one African book or one African thinker'.<sup>11</sup> To become a global citizen, Mbembe claimed, one has to possess a global archive, reading from various sources and writers around the world, and he insisted on the need to increase European students' access to and focus on texts from outside Europe. 'To share the world is a precondition for taking care of the world', he argued.<sup>12</sup> This had been a problem at Wits in South Africa too. According to a student leader there, it was possible 'to go through a humanities curriculum without meeting one African, female lecturer and without learning anything outside of a deeply Eurocentric curriculum'.<sup>13</sup>

- 9 Thus, out of some 30,000 pages of curricula in social studies in Norwegian teacher education, just 78 were written by scholars from the Global South. Maybe SAIH and PRIO's call for the decolonization of academia in Norway was rather more urgent than my first glance at the curriculum had suggested? The answer, of course, depends on what the subject matter in social studies teacher education should be. If it should consist of Norwegian national issues, the lack of non-Anglo-Saxon authors would not be a problem. However, this is not the case.

## 2. What is the central focus in social science programmes for teachers in Norway?

- 10 The Directorate for Higher Education and Training under the Ministry of Education defines the objectives of educational programmes. Within social sciences for teachers, the Directorate states: 'In a time when the population is more diversified than ever before, and where the world is coming closer together, language skills and cultural understanding are growing in importance. Schools should support the development of each person's identity, make the pupils confident in who they are, and present common values that are needed to participate in this diverse society and to open doors to the world and the future.'<sup>14</sup>
- 11 More than 10% of pupils in Norwegian primary and secondary schools have at least one parent from Latin America, Africa or Asia. However, most teachers have no academic input from these regions. Without any familiarity with the knowledge developed in these regions, it may be difficult for their teachers to fulfil the aim of contributing to developing the pupils' personal identities and make them confident in who they are.
- 12 According to the Directorate, social studies should, more precisely, give the pupils:

[T]he opportunity to explore [...] national and global challenges. [...] The pupils shall be encouraged to wonder at, reflect on and assess how knowledge about society at large has been established'.<sup>15</sup> The content [...] shall be seen through various perspectives, from the local to the global [...].<sup>16</sup> The teaching and training shall give the pupils understanding of critical and scientific thinking. [...] The teaching and training must create understanding that the methodologies for examining the real world must be adapted to what we want to study, and that the choice of methodology influences what we see. [...]. The pupils must be able to assess different sources of knowledge and think critically about how knowledge is developed.<sup>17</sup>

- 13 Accordingly, the Norwegian Ministry of Education focuses on critical thinking, various perspectives on knowledge and various methodologies for establishing knowledge, both locally and globally, in social studies in teacher education. As long as no scholar from the Global South is represented on the curriculum, it may induce students to think that knowledge about society at large is not developed in the Global South. The close to all-white curriculum leaves the students with the impression that the most relevant and objectively best academic texts are written in the Anglo-Saxon world. In fact, when I argued for a decolonization of the curriculum in social studies at my own university, the University of Stavanger, a first response from a student was: 'But do they really write high-quality and relevant analysis in these countries?' The same type of reactions appeared on social media after I published an article entitled 'The curriculum is entirely white. Decolonise now!'<sup>18</sup> in the daily newspaper *Aftenposten*. One might think these arguments only came from the internet trolls and uniformed students. However, also quite a few prominent professors at renowned universities also used similar arguments in the public debate. One example includes a high-profile professor of sociology, Gunnar Aakvaag, who wrote in the weekly intellectual paper *Morgenbladet* that: 'Only if there had been impartial, universal and peer reviewed academic papers written by researchers from the Global South on subjects of interest for social studies in Norway, it would have been a problem that they were not represented on the curriculum'.<sup>19</sup> In my view, these reactions indicate that postcolonial theory has not made sufficient impact in Norway to declare 'decolonizing academia' irrelevant in the country.

- 14 Opponents of postcolonial theory sometimes argue that postcolonial perspectives are not relevant where no colonial enterprise took place. For example, a professor of political science at the University of Oslo, Janne Haaland Matlary, stated in an interview that 'colonisation is over decades ago, equality in education is a reality and the claim that science is still colonized comes without empirical evidence' and added that 'gender, skin colour and nationality are totally irrelevant when it comes to scientific search for truth'.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The relevance of decolonization of academia in Norway: for sceptics

- 15 In 1960, 0.1% of the Norwegian population, some 2,550 inhabitants out of about 3.6million,<sup>21</sup> originated from the Global South.<sup>22</sup> In 2020, 18.5% of Norway's inhabitants, close to a million out of 5.4 million, were first- or second-generation immigrants. A slight majority of them, 48.7%, were descended from the Global South (Latin America, Asia, Africa) while 48.1% originated from other European or North American countries.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in two generations, 70 years, Norway has changed from being an ethnic homogenous society to become a heterogenous and multicultural society.
- 16 From mid-1800 to at least the 1970s, the Norwegian state had actively tried to repress and assimilate the Sámi people. Sámi languages were prohibited at schools, and state-sponsored missionaries actively tried to convert the Sámi to Lutheranism. However, gradually the official policy on the Sámi changed. The Norwegian state acknowledged the Sámi as indigenous people, culturally and linguistically different from the majority population in Norway. In 1989 the Sámi opened their own parliament as well as a Sámi University College, both recognized by the Norwegian state. In 1990, Norway ratified the ILO 169 Convention on Indigenous People. In 1992, the Sámi languages were recognized as official languages in Norway. In 1997, the Norwegian king apologized to the Sámi people for 'the injustices the Norwegian state has inflicted on the Sámi people through a harsh policy of assimilation'.<sup>24</sup> And from 2020, primary, secondary and junior high schools were obliged to have curriculum content on Indigenous Peoples, especially focusing on the Sámi people. Thus, today Norway officially recognizes both its internal colonial past and its multicultural present.



- 17 Still, however, controversies about Norway's role in external colonial endeavours are numerous. Norway's image, both nationally and internationally, as a small, neutral state with a strong human rights agenda and no colonial past persists (see e.g. Høglund & Burnett, 2019; Palmberg, 2009; Leira 2007, Gullestad, 2006; Nustad, 2003). Was Norway's role in colonial endeavours an active or a passive one? The answer depends on how to interpret the degree of Norway's self-determination and power as part of the Denmark–Norway union (1380 to 1814). Denmark-Norway possessed numerous slave-trading forts on the Gold Coast, including Fort Christiansborg (today: Osu Castle). Between 1650 and 1804, some 100,000 slaves from West Africa were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean on vessels owned, and partially staffed, by Danes or Norwegians (Hove, 2017).<sup>25</sup> Many of these slaves laboured on the sugar plantations in the Danish-Norwegian Caribbean colonies: St Thomas, St John and St Croix (Hopkins, 2019). These islands were annexed or bought between 1670 and 1733 by a Danish trade company but later governed by the Danish-Norwegian state.<sup>26</sup>
- 18 Some 2,000 Scandinavians, including more than 200 Norwegians, contributed as private mercenaries, skippers and private contractors to King Leopold's colonization of Congo/Zaire from 1885 to 1910. As an aside, it is probably not coincidental that Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* gained his position as a captain because the former captain, a Dane named Fresleven, behaved so badly that he got killed. While many Scandinavians died on duty,<sup>27</sup> most of them of illness, others returned home with arts and crafts confiscated in the Congo. Some 30,000 objects are still held by Scandinavian museums, and an unknown number by private individuals (Tygesen & Wæhle, 2007).
- 19 Finally, Denmark–Norway also possessed land and a trading fort in India. Trankebar (today: Tharangambadi) on the western coast of India was under Danish-Norwegian control for more than two centuries (Nustad, 2003). For 18 years, from 1788 to 1806, Peder Anker, a well-reputed Norwegian businessman and later Norwegian prime minister, governed Trankebar.
- 20 Still, and despite numerous newer studies indicating close connections between Norway and various colonial endeavours, official Norway is reluctant to admit that Norway has a colonial past: in the Denmark–Norway union, supposedly Denmark alone was responsible for the foreign policy. While it is beyond doubt that Scandinavia was not among the most imperialistic European powers in the

19th century, to me Norway's 'colonial complicity' (Vuorela, 2009) is unambiguous. In line with Leira (2007: 8), then, we can argue that the image projected, both internally and externally, by official Norway about the country's historical foreign policy is part of Norway's 'identity politics'. Official Norway recognizes its internal colonial past (Sámi) and its multicultural present (due to migration), while refusing to admit Norwegian participation in any form of external, imperialistic colonization, to the point of refusing even a touch of 'colonial complicity'.

## 4. #RhodesMustFall

- 21 On 9 March 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a student of political science at the University of Cape Town (South Africa), threw a bucket of faeces at the statue of Cecil Rhodes (Mamdani, 2016: 68). The statue in the centre of the campus was regarded as a colonial symbol of racism and exploitation of coloured and black inhabitants of South Africa. Maxwele was protesting the continued white colonial dominance of the university: 21 years after the formal end of apartheid, the curriculum was still Eurocentric and the professors white. This event was the beginning of the massive movement known as #RhodesMustFall, with the aim of decolonizing academia. The movement spread rapidly out from Cape Town to other universities in South Africa and further to many African and, later, European universities.
- 22 The (then) limit of 144 characters on Twitter, one of the main forms of communication of the protest, made it difficult to develop one common platform regarding what the decolonization of academia actually meant. The social-media-based movement had no formal leadership or members. It was impossible to agree on how far the demands for decolonization should go. Some wanted only a more pluralistic curriculum including texts written by a diversity of authors. They demanded a curriculum that included the perspectives of people of colour, of those from economic and political minorities, from places other than Europe and the United States. They demanded that Eurocentric curriculum lists be replaced with a more ethno-pluralistic curriculum (Nyamnjoh, 2016). The arguments for this were several. Some pointed out that the most important thing was strengthened self-esteem and identity when parts of the curriculum were written by people like themselves. It was important to show that people from the Global South were also high-level producers of knowledge. It was important that

the students recognized themselves in the curriculum and understood its relevance (see e.g. Gallagher et al., 2016). For others, it was important to point out that social science and humanities knowledge does not convey objective truths but rather that the knowledge and insights depend on the researchers' point of view, experience and perspective (see e.g. Curriculum Change Working Group, 2018; Melber, 2018).

- 23 However, ethno-pluralism does not necessarily imply epistemological variation. There is no guarantee of unfamiliar perspectives, creativity and difference in research, writing or teaching inherent in the fact that someone has an African name (Gallagher, Death et al., 2016: 445–46). A Cameroonian historian working at Wits in Johannesburg, Francis Nyamnjoh, has stated this even more clearly: 'privilege, power and opportunity refuse to be defined narrowly by the dictates of pigmentation' (Nyamnjoh 2016: 7).
- 24 Still, many of the South African student activists argued that it was necessary to replace researchers from the Global North with researchers from the Global South. Although, the epistemologies used are not necessarily different, it would demonstrate that knowledge production and dissemination also take place in the Global South. A group of researchers and students appointed by the University of Cape Town to summarize lessons learned from #RhodesMustFall produced a 67-page report with 11 recommendations. 'When the intent is to decolonize the mind, texts from the epistemologically disenfranchised that would otherwise be excluded should become core-reading material' was one of them. Another reads: 'Knowledge must be understood as both situational and relational, with questions rather than method driving knowledge production'. (Curriculum Change Working Group, 2018: 5).

## 4.1. Issues not relevant in Norway

- 25 In South Africa, many supporters of the #RhodesMustFall movement called for other changes important in a South African context, but of little or no relevance in Norway.
- 26 The languages of instruction in higher education were central in South Africa, a country with 11 official languages. Only English and Afrikaans, the two former colonial languages, were accepted languages of instruction at university level (Lebeloane, 2017). Norway has two official language, Bokmål (based on Danish)

and Nynorsk (based on spoken dialects), equally recognized and understood throughout the country. In addition, Sámi languages are recognized as official languages in various municipalities in the northern parts of Norway.<sup>28</sup> In fact, 82% of Norwegians have Bokmål as their prime language, while close to 12% primarily use Nynorsk. Some 10,000 people (0.002% of the population) use Sámi as their prime language.<sup>29</sup> In the university college in the northern town of Karasjokk, all three languages are used, while Bokmål and Nynorsk are used in the rest of the country's universities and colleges. In addition, the use of English, both written and spoken, is recognized at all universities. Thus, recognition of languages at universities was never mentioned by supporters of 'decolonizing the university' in Norway.

27 In South Africa, high and increasing fees for university studies was an important issue. In fact, so central was the question of pecuniary access to the universities that #FeesMustFall gained as much attention as #RhodesMustFall. In Norway, close to all universities are public, and all public universities are free. In addition, students have access to rent-free loans from a government-run special bank, Lånekassen. Lånekassen is a bank but also part of the welfare state, established in 1947 to make education accessible to everyone, independent of financial means.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while financial accessibility to higher education was an important part of the decolonization movement in South Africa, it was not even mentioned in Norway. The same applied to the cost of student housing and transport: both were part of the debates on decolonizing university in South Africa but neither were ever mentioned in Norway. This may be part of the reason why it was not the students but the faculty who were the most active participants in the decolonial debates in Norway.

## 5. The debate on decolonizing academia in Norway: 'first edition'

28 What, then, were the main positions and arguments among students and faculty in the decolonization debate in Norway? Using the search engine Retriever, which covers nothing but all printed newspapers in Norway, I found close to 150 letters and interviews published on these issues from June 2018 to February 2020. Most of them were written by professors at various universities, but some students and student organizations also participated in the debate. I coded the

arguments and uncovered two main categories of argument: (1) those who argued that knowledge is objective, general and universal and does not depend on the researcher/writer, and who therefore denounced decolonization; (2) those who argued that knowledge is situational and context-related and thus dependent on the researcher's/writer's point of departure/position, and who therefore supported the idea of decolonization. To show the temperature, vocabulary and arguments of the public debate, I will give space to a few of the most significant voices.

## 5.1. Science is objective and independent of the researcher

- 29 Five professors at the University of Oslo, including a political scientist and a philosopher, ignited the public decolonization debate by stating that 'using scientific and rational methods, critically assessed by other researchers, we can develop universal knowledge and insights, regardless of the individual researcher's gender, ethnicity and other backgrounds' and concluded that universities should employ the best professors and use the best curriculum.<sup>31</sup> One of them, a biologist, told the student-run news magazine *Universitas* that the SAIH resolution showed 'an extreme understanding of epistemology and a dangerous politization of science'.<sup>32</sup>
- 30 A professor of sociology stated that 'Science is [...] grounded on the value of objective truth' and that the norms that guide science are 'universalism (don't look at the researcher's background), impartiality (don't promote interests of specific groups) and verifiability (reviewed by fellows)'.<sup>33</sup> He wrote that only if there had been impartial, universal and peer-reviewed academic papers written by researchers from the Global South on subjects of interest for social studies in Norway would it have been a problem that none were represented.<sup>34</sup>
- 31 A professor in biology stated that 'modern scientific methods mean that scientists minimize their prejudices. The search for universal and provable knowledge is, in fact, the project of science'.<sup>35</sup> In fact, basically all protagonists in the 'anti-decolonize academia' camp argued that those in favour of decolonization were arguing for relativistic and subjective truths.

## 5.2. Knowledge is situational, and thus dependent on the researcher's perspective

- 32 The anti-decolonization professors met with opposition from within the academy. A professor of history stated that he was surprised by the 'deeply disturbing and authoritarian mindset' his colleagues demonstrated by rejecting the relevance of decolonizing academia in Norway. He claimed that his colleagues could not be aware of debates within humanistic and social science research over the past 50 years.<sup>36</sup> Rectors from four universities published a joint statement arguing, albeit implicitly, that the decolonization debate should be welcomed: 'We must never stop challenging existing truths, seeking new scientific methods and having a critical view of knowledge. This is the nature of science. The question is rather whether Western epistemologies are interested in scientific challenges from outside the Global North.'<sup>37</sup>
- 33 The leader of the SAIH argued that to gain new and valid knowledge in social sciences it is imperative to do research with a range of various perspectives. For SAIH, the decolonization debate 'is not about changing principles and methods of science or replacing Western traditions within our universities, it's about acknowledging that other perspectives and value systems can also be worth considering'.<sup>38</sup> Later, a similar point was made by the new leader of SAIH: 'Decolonization is about striving for nuanced knowledge, asking questions, and being exposed to a multitude of perspectives' (Høiskar, 2020: 176).
- 34 The leaders of African student associations at four Norwegian universities also joined forces and supported the decolonization movement in Norway. It is not about 'bringing pseudoscience into the curriculum, but about expanding our perspectives to a more holistic and broad approach to knowledge', they claimed at the end of 2018.<sup>39</sup>

## 5.3. The decolonization of academia is only identity politics, and thus worthless

- 35 Sociologist and member of the government-appointed committee on freedom of speech Kjetil Rolness had a letter published in *Aftenposten* headed 'When science is approaching madness. The university – a place where reason goes to die?', in which he spoke about the decolonization movement as 'identity politics'

and 'moral hysteria'. 'Poor ex-colonies need knowledge and technology to fight malaria, provide water and build infrastructure. Not postcolonial theories arguing that reason and logic are Western ways of thinking.'<sup>40</sup> He was supported by a professor of sociology, who argued that the decolonization of academia was just another way to promote identity politics and minority groups' interests.<sup>41</sup> A mixed group of well-known professors at the University of Oslo – three philosophers, a political scientist, a medical doctor and a biologist – held that the decolonization movement was 'an ideologically motivated attack on the rational basis of the existence of the universities'.<sup>42</sup> Finally, a philosophy professor argued that the wish to decolonize academia was 'nothing but identity politics' and 'violates the principles of professionalism within science'.<sup>43</sup>

## 6. The decolonial debate in Norway: positivism vs postcolonialism

- 36 The decolonization debate in Norway was thus more a disagreement about diverging scientific methods, a clash of different paradigms or epistemologies, than one about representation, racism, coloniality, language, identity, fees and accessibility – central elements in the South African debate.
- 37 The first group, albeit implicitly, argued for a positivist position on science in line with the view that 'the world awaited the scientist and provided objective tests of scientific hypotheses' (Hollis 2002: 236). For them, 'the world exists independently of us [scientists]' and most of them would reject qualitative methods and psychological data (Hollis 2002: 43–45).
- 38 The pro-decolonization group would value postmodern, or at least postcolonial, theory, with 'the ability to speak out in differing forms about different world views and experiences' (Wisker, 2007: 173). They would nod in recognition at the famous statement by Chandra Talpade Mohanty: 'There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship' (1984: 334). They would agree with Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who argued that 'knowledge and culture were as much a part of imperialism as raw materials and military strength' (Tuhiwai Smith [1999] 2005: 58), a point also made by Achille Mbembe when he argued that the liberation struggles against colonial governments were not just material struggles but just as much a mental struggle for intellectual liberation. They would agree and laugh when they read

Mbembe's slightly ironical talk of 'European universalism' (Mbembe 2006). In line with Santos (2018), they would agree that what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts are equally important.

- 39 For the pro-decolonization camp, decolonization implies inclusion in every meaning of the term (Waghid, 2021:2). They would argue that multiple perspectives are fundamental in trying to get closer to truth (Santos, 2018). 'To decolonize the university is to [...] reform it with the aim of creating a [...] more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism' (Mbembe, 2016: 37) Inclusion and pluriversalism would, most probably, make people appreciate differences. In a study of university lecturers' appreciation of the decolonization movement in South Africa, Mashiyi et. al (2020: 154) emphasized that decolonization is important in order to develop students' critical thinking and empathy for difference. Both of these qualities are important goals within social studies in the Norwegian teacher education programme.
- 40 The problem in Norway arises because most faculty do not want to mix science and politics. And decolonization is not apolitical. In fact, decoloniality involves both a political and epistemological movement aimed at liberating people from colonial sub-positions, and a new way of thinking, knowing and doing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015: 485). A continued coloniality would imply 'the reproduction of knowledges that continue to justify European and white *de facto* supremacy and renders colonised peoples' knowledges and livelihoods backwards, inferior or non-existent' (Eriksen and Svendsen, 2020: 2–3).
- 41 In January 2020, the SAIH published a 50-page guide to decolonizing academia called 'An introduction to decolonization and how you can contribute'.<sup>44</sup> The guide also included a chapter on Norway's colonization of the indigenous Sámi people. However, it was not until December 2021, when the national public radio station, NRK, launched a series of 13 hour-long podcasts introduced as 'Norwegian history from a Sámi perspective', that the Sámi entered the focus of the decolonization debate in Norway.



# 7. The debate on decolonizing academia debate in Norway: 'second edition'

## 7.1. Norwegian history from a Sámi perspective

- 42 The podcast 'Norwegian history from a Sámi perspective' was produced by the University of Oslo and largely built on the newly published book *Sámi history 1751–2010* (Oslo: Cappelandam, 2021).<sup>45</sup> This series was soon to be debated, in a debate where some arguments were very similar to some of those used in the #RhodesMustFall campaign. The debate played out mainly through three channels, a Facebook group called 'Indigenous People are Joining Forces',<sup>46</sup> an online daily edited news site for academic affairs, Khrono,<sup>47</sup> but most frequently in the paper or the online editions of the Norwegian daily paper, *Nordlys*.<sup>48</sup> The online version of this last channel reposted most of the debates elsewhere, and it is therefore used as the main source here.
- 43 An ethnic Sámi and professor of law at the Norwegian Arctic University, Ande Somby, argued that one would expect some new perspectives, some new source material including oral sources, some new questions and mass Sámi participation, in the making of the programme, since it was described as 'from a Sámi perspective'. Yet Somby maintained that none of these issues were taken care of and that the series brought nothing new. The producers of the podcast series replied that this was a series where different views and perspective were given voice, that the voices were among the most prominent and knowledgeable researchers on Sámi issues in Norway, and that six of the 18 guests in the series had Sámi background.<sup>49</sup> Somby claimed that it was essential to have different perspectives in order 'to be able to understand how others think and feel', so that then, as a society, we can become 'more passionate, more empathic and have less prejudices'.<sup>50</sup> Six of the participating researchers in the series, Sámi and Norwegians, argued that 'not all Sámi interpret historical events the same way, that among the Sámi there are multiple perspectives and different voices'. However, they agreed that this fine series would have been even better with more numerous indigenous participants.<sup>51</sup>

- 44 Two law professors, Somby being one of them, at the Arctic University then argued that ‘in the Sámi community, the podcast series can easily be perceived as a continuation of a long history of degrading the Sámi in their right to present themselves and tell their own history and present their own traditions. [...] In practice this is still a continuation of the colonial abuses..<sup>52</sup> According to a colleague at the Department of History at the same university, Somby ‘discredits his opponents based on their ethnic origin, not their arguments’.<sup>53</sup>
- 45 Another Sámi professor of law at the Arctic University, Øyvind Ravna, gave credit to NRK, for giving focus to Sámi history. He could not find any factual faults in the podcasts. However, ‘NRK fails to tell about well-documented and, from a Sámi perspective, significant events’. According to Ravna, what was left out deserved more critique than what was included.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

- 46 This debate was in fact very much more similar than the earlier one in Norway had been to that in South Africa. The experiences of the Sámi, as a former colonized, assimilated, bullied, neglected, overruled, Christianized community, not allowed to speak or write in their own languages when in school, forced into boarding schools when they still had a nomadic life, resembled those that characterized colonization in the Global South. For many Sámi, decolonization means transforming them from being studied objects into acting subjects in their own history and, in line with Omarjee in South Africa, getting rid of a curriculum that ‘perpetuates coloniality and white supremacy’ (Omarjee 2018: 107).

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## \* NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Nordic Historical Conference organized by Uppsala University in 2021. Thanks to discussant Helga B. Harnes for valuable comments. Thanks also to Silje Norman and Tord Austdal for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> This debate happened under many different headings: decolonize academia, decolonize university, #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, etc.

<sup>3</sup> SAIH is a well-established association consisting of 20 student parliaments representing the students at 20 universities and university colleges in Norway, the boards of 10 universities, and six unions for university employees.

<sup>4</sup> SAIH's vision is that everyone should have access to an inclusive and good education in a world of fair distribution, without any violation of democracy and human rights. The organization's foundational values are inspired by the Brazilian liberation pedagogue Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. [Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf \(saih.no\)](#)

(<https://saih.no/assets/docs/Avkolonisering/Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> [Resolusjon-5-Avkolonisering-av-høyere-utdanning\\_Vedtatt-av-Årsmøtet-2018.docx \(live.com\)](#)

([https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fsaih.no%2Fassets%2Fdocs%2FResolusjon-5-Avkolonisering-av-h%25C3%25B8yere-utdanning\\_Vedtatt-av-%25C3%2585rsm%25C3%25B8tet-2018.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fsaih.no%2Fassets%2Fdocs%2FResolusjon-5-Avkolonisering-av-h%25C3%25B8yere-utdanning_Vedtatt-av-%25C3%2585rsm%25C3%25B8tet-2018.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK))

[Avkolonisering-av-h%25C3%25B8yere-utdanning\\_Vedtatt-av-%25C3%2585rsm%25C3%25B8tet-2018.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](#))

<sup>6</sup> [Moderne vitenskap utviklet seg samtidig med slavehandel og utnyttelse. Det er på tide å dekolonisere akademien | Ida Roland Birkvad og Cindy Horst \(aftenposten.no\)](#)

(<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/Rxwgg55/moderne-vitenskap-utviklet-seg-samtidig-med-slavehandel-og-utnyttelse>)

<sup>7</sup> [Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf \(saih.no\)](#) (<https://saih.no/assets/docs/Avkolonisering/Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf>)

- 8 Samenes historie: Sannhet og forsoning - Norgeshistorie - NRK Radio  
(<https://radio.nrk.no/serie/norgeshistorie/KMTE87005221>)
- 9 ucl\_inclusive\_curriculum\_healthcheck\_2018.pdf ([https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/ucl\\_inclusive\\_curriculum\\_healthcheck\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/ucl_inclusive_curriculum_healthcheck_2018.pdf)). I changed "UK" with "Norway".
- 10 All Norwegian pupils have to learn Norwegian and English at school and are supposed to read, write and speak both languages before starting a university programme. In addition, Danish is so similar to Norwegian that few students would find it very difficult to read. The Ministry of Education also specifies that students in Norway should get more of the curriculum in English.
- 11 Et arkiv for hele verden | Klassekampen (<https://klassekampen.no/utgave/2018-12-01/et-arkiv-for-hele-verden>)
- 12 Et arkiv for hele verden | Klassekampen (<https://klassekampen.no/utgave/2018-12-01/et-arkiv-for-hele-verden>)
- 13 Cited in Nyamnjoh (2016: 147).
- 14 1.2 Identitet og kulturelt mangfold (udir.no) (<https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/opplaringens-verdigrunnlag/1.2-identitet-og-kulturelt-mangfold/?lang=eng>)
- 15 Fagets relevans og sentrale verdier - Læreplan i samfunnsfag (SAF01-04) (udir.no)  
(<https://www.udir.no/lk20/saf01-04/om-faget/fagets-relevans-og-verdier?lang=eng>)
- 16 Kjerneelementer - Læreplan i samfunnsfag (SAF01-04) (udir.no) (<https://www.udir.no/lk20/saf01-04/om-faget/kjerneelementer?lang=eng>)
- 17 1.3 Kritisk tenkning og etisk bevissthet (udir.no) (<https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/opplaringens-verdigrunnlag/1.3-kritisk-tenkning-og-etisk-bevissthet/?kode=saf01-04&lang=eng>)
- 18 Samfunnsfaget i lærerutdanningene er hvitt og norsk. Avkoloniser pensum nå! | Ketil Fred Hansen (aftenposten.no) (<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/GGb3Rl/samfunnsfaget-i-laererutdanningene-er-hvitt-og-norsk-avkoloniser-pensu>). For social media reactions, see (2) Aftenposten meninger - Innlegg | Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/apmeninger/posts/2690034971050965>)
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- 21 Tabell 3.9 Folkemengde, etter fødeland. (ssb.no) (<https://www.ssb.no/a/histstat/tabeller/3-9.html>) Landområder (ssb.no) (<https://www.ssb.no/a/histstat/tabeller/3-9.html>)
- 22 Understood here as Latin America, Africa and Asia.
- 23 Innvandrere fra 206 land i Norge - SSB (<https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/innvandrere-fra-206-land-i-norge>) ; Innvandring og demografi | IMDi (<https://www.imdi.no/om-integrering-i-norge/fakta-om-innvandrere-og-integrering-2021/innvandring-og-demografi/>) ;

Innvandring (ssb.no) (<https://www.ssb.no/innvandring-og-innvandrere/faktaside/innvandring>)

24 Cited e.g. in For 20 år siden beklaget kongen behandlingen av samene. I dag gikk Erna Solberg langt i å gjøre det samme (dagbladet.no) (<https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/for-20-ar-siden-beklaget-kongen-behandlingen-av-samene-i-dag-gikk-erna-solberg-langt-i-a-gjore-det-samme/67012344>)

25 Jon Olav Hove (2017) Dei vestindiske øyane og den dansk/norske slavehandel - Arkivverket (<https://www.arkivverket.no/utforsk-arkivene/eldre-historie--1814/de-vestindiske-oyer-og-den-dansk-norske-slavehandel>)

26 In 1917, Denmark sold the islands to the US, which named them the US Virgin Islands.

27 A detailed list, including their nationality and occupation, of 921 Scandinavians in Congo between 1878 and 1904 can be found in Jenssen-Tusch (1905): Appendix I.

28 språk i Norge – Store norske leksikon (snl.no) ([https://snl.no/spr%C3%A5k\\_i\\_Norge](https://snl.no/spr%C3%A5k_i_Norge))

29 Fakta om samiske språk - regjeringen.no (<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/urfolk-og-minoriteter/samepolitikk/samiske-sprak/fakta-om-samiske-sprak/id633131/>) ; 327486 (ssb.no) ([https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/\\_attachment/327486?\\_ts=15f6cbddc98](https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/_attachment/327486?_ts=15f6cbddc98)) ;

30 About Lånekassen (lanekassen.no) (<https://www.lanekassen.no/en-US/presse-og-samfunnskontakt/about-lanekassen/>)

31 Avkoloniseringsideologien truer universitetene | Forskere ved Universitetet i Oslo (aftenposten.no) (<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/EoAkmP/avkoloniseringsideologien-truer-universitetene-forskere-ved-univers>). Hereafter, all translations from Norwegian to English are mine.

32 Universitas 12, September 2018, «Debatten om avkolonialisering splitter academia». Hentet fra <https://universitas.no/sak/64621/kritiserer-saih-de-kan-ikke-mene-noe-sa-ekstremt-o/> (<https://universitas.no/sak/64621/kritiserer-saih-de-kan-ikke-mene-noe-sa-ekstremt-o/>)

33 Aakvaag, «We owe the teacher students of the future not to decolonize their curriculum', Morgenbladet 28.02.2020. Vi skylder fremtidens lærerstudenter å ikke «avkolonisere» utdanningen deres, skriver Gunnar C. Aakvaag. – Morgenbladet (<https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/kommentar/2020/02/28/vi-skylder-fremtidens-laererstudenter-a-ikke-avkolonisere-utdanningen-deres-skriver-gunnar-c-aakvaag/>).

34 Vi skylder fremtidens lærerstudenter å ikke «avkolonisere» utdanningen deres, skriver Gunnar C. Aakvaag. – Morgenbladet (<https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/kommentar/2020/02/28/vi-skylder-fremtidens-laererstudenter-a-ikke-avkolonisere-utdanningen-deres-skriver-gunnar-c-aakvaag/>).

35 Siste ord | Klassekampen (<https://klassekampen.no/utgave/2018-10-11/debatt-siste-ord>)

36 Erling Sandmo i Vårt Land 18. August 2018 «Et dypt foruroligende autoritært sinnelag»

37 Fire universitetsrektorer: – Universitetene trues ikke av ideer utenfra (aftenposten.no) (<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/VR8Q3W/fire-universitetsrektorer-universitetene-trues-ikke-av-ideer-utenf>)

- 38 [Avkolonisering vil kunne styrke forskningen | Beathe Øgård \(aftenposten.no\)](https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/P3GQo6/avkolonisering-vil-kunne-styrke-forskningen-beathe-oegaard)  
(<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/P3GQo6/avkolonisering-vil-kunne-styrke-forskningen-beathe-oegaard>)
- 39 <https://dagens.klassekampen.no/2018-12-27/debatt-sammen-om-avkolonisering>  
(<https://dagens.klassekampen.no/2018-12-27/debatt-sammen-om-avkolonisering>)
- 40 [Når vitenskap nærmer seg galskap | Kjetil Rolness \(aftenposten.no\)](https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kommentar/i/3JW83A/naar-vitenskap-naermer-seg-galskap-kjetil-rolness)  
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- 41 Aakvaag, «We owe the teacher students of the future not to decolonize their curriculum', *Morgenbladet* 28.02.2020. [Vi skylder fremtidens lærerstudenter å ikke «avkolonisere» utdanningen deres, skriver Gunnar C. Aakvaag. – Morgenbladet](https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/kommentar/2020/02/28/vi-skylder-fremtidens-laererstudenter-a-ikke-avkolonisere-utdanningen-deres-skriver-gunnar-c-aakvaag/)  
(<https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/kommentar/2020/02/28/vi-skylder-fremtidens-laererstudenter-a-ikke-avkolonisere-utdanningen-deres-skriver-gunnar-c-aakvaag/>)
- 42 [Kort sagt, fredag 2. november \(aftenposten.no\)](https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/P3J8pR/kort-sagt-fredag-2-november) (<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/P3J8pR/kort-sagt-fredag-2-november>)
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(<https://arkiv.klassekampen.no/article/20180726/ARTICLE/180729977>)
- 44 [Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf \(saih.no\)](https://saih.no/assets/docs/Avkolonisering/Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf) (<https://saih.no/assets/docs/Avkolonisering/Avkolonisering-ENG.pdf>)
- 45 The book is available only in Norwegian. [Samenes historie fra 1751 til 2010 av Andresen, Evjen og Ryymin \(red.\)](https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543) ([https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/\\_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543](https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543)) | [Cappelen Damm Undervisning](https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543) ([https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/\\_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543](https://www.cappelendammundervisning.no/_samenes-historie-fra-1751-til-2010-9788202235543))
- 46 (1) [Indigenous people are joining forces | Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/groups/18774571981) (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/18774571981>). This group had around 30,000 followers from all over the world when this debate was at its most intensive.
- 47 [www.khrono.no](http://www.khrono.no) (<http://www.khrono.no>)
- 48 [www.nordnorskdebatt.no](http://www.nordnorskdebatt.no) (<http://www.nordnorskdebatt.no>)
- 49 [Samisk historie, NRK | Hva betyr samisk perspektiv? \(nordnorskdebatt.no\)](https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/hva-betyr-samisk-perspektiv/o/5-124-156039)  
(<https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/hva-betyr-samisk-perspektiv/o/5-124-156039>)
- 50 [Samisk historie, NRK | Ja, hva betyr er et samisk perspektiv? \(nordnorskdebatt.no\)](https://www.nordnorskdebatt.no/ja-hva-betyr-er-et-samisk-perspektiv/o/5-124-156312)  
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## AUTHOR

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Ketil Fred Hansen

University of Stavanger, [ketil.f.hansen@uis.no](mailto:ketil.f.hansen@uis.no)

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