

*Public Policy, Teaching and Learning: Fit for Purpose?*

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See: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-12-its-time-we-academics-climbed-out-of-our-western-ivory-towers-and-embraced-new-ways-of-thinking/>

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The call for an alternative approach to the studying and teaching of public administration, defined by Emeritus Professor of Government at the University of Manchester as the ‘architecture for government and the delivery of its policies’ (Talbot, 2020)<sup>1</sup> - in the global south - is an old one. But the recent past and unfolding present, the global protests against systematic racism, systematic poverty, institutional exclusion and structural violence – have resolutely dislodged traditional anchors of public administration, and, more broadly, public policy teaching and learning.

As the pandemic fundamentally alters the architectures and policies of governments worldwide, and when heterodoxy becomes orthodoxy, can mainstream public policy teaching and learning change its content, curriculum and complexion: presently predominantly white, masculine, hetero-normative, universally applicable northern/Western knowledge that stigmatizes and denigrates all other - non-Western - knowledge as custom, magic, occult, ancestry, anecdotal, parochial, provincial, situated, pre- and un-scientific? Academics and researchers are many times oblivious to the fact that ‘scientific’ research – its neutrality, its universality, and its objectivity - is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism (Smith, 2012)<sup>2</sup> and Empire. Even the transdisciplinary research clergy, praise singers and cheerleaders have ‘not changed the Western cultural archive itself and that Western science continues to dominate other ways of knowing in this integrative approach in transdisciplinary research’ (Le Grange, 2017: 167).<sup>3</sup>

The protests worldwide occur in a world economy suffering from a ‘unique combination of supply and demand shocks’ with the International Monetary Fund expecting a 3% global contraction over the course of the year (Butler, 2020).<sup>4</sup> The protests occur at the height of state-led and state-enabled ecological devastation, corporate super-exploitation, rising income and wealth inequality, global decimation of employment and livelihoods, acute precarity and impoverization – ‘one hundred million more people

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<sup>1</sup> Talbot, C. 2020. From Public Administration to New Public Management: who killed the study of public administration in the UK? *London School of Economics (LSE) British Politics and Policy*, 20 August. 6 August. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/public-administration-uk/> (Accessed 8 August 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Smith, L.T. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Second Edition. London and New York: Zed Books

<sup>3</sup> Le Grange, L. 2017. (Trans)disciplinary research (re)considered. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(6):167–176.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, A. 2020. Predictions in South Africa not rosy. *Business Day*, 30 July. Available at <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2020-07-30-anthony-butler-predictions-not-rosy-about-sa-in-a-post-covid-world/> (Accessed 31 July)

could be pushed into extreme poverty' because of the pandemic – with the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, anticipating 'famines of historic proportions' (18 July 2020).<sup>5</sup> Black Lives Matters-led global protests are pitted, amongst others, against religious nationalism, white supremacy, enhanced surveillance of citizens, unprecedented levels of state coercion and government violence, and the steady erosion of democracy and the rights of people.

The question: Is public policy and its teaching and learning awake and alert to the present zeitgeist in the streets, universities and lecture halls? Is contemporary mainstream public policy, teaching and learning fit for purpose?

For too long, public policy teaching and learning in southern schools have, at worst, denied, and at best dismissed their own concrete realities – a captured and/or bankrupt state; a state unable to provide rudimentary basic services, health and education to its citizens, especially to the vulnerable and destitute; wide-scale and rampant informalization; dysfunctional and uncompetitive markets; pervasive predation by hyper-financialized public and private elites<sup>6</sup>; corruption and destructive (vs productive) rent-seeking; etc. It has long been argued that the Western cannon and northern models of public policy and administration cares little about this as their syllabi and curriculums assume a relatively functional market and state with capacitated regulatory and administrative authorities to rein in abuses and excesses of citizens and the government. Interestingly – public sector and service reform in post-apartheid South Africa, driven by mainly white academics and academics-turned consultants swallowed holus bolus the neoliberal new public management; preaching with evangelical zeal: depoliticization, deregulation, downsizing - Osborne and Gaebler-style (1992)<sup>7</sup> – to the (soon to be) officials and politicians of the first democratic majority government. The result, a genocidal betrayal: the state retreated into the role of the 'fixer of markets and outsourcer of services'; there was, and continues to be, criminal under-investment in basic services, education and health; and the decimation of the state's infrastructural power and

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<sup>5</sup> Guterres, A. 2020. Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era. *Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture 2020*, New York, 18 July (Available at <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech>) (Accessed 4 August 2020)

<sup>6</sup> In Africa, '30 per [USD 500 billion] cent of all African financial wealth is held offshore, costing about 14 billion dollars in lost tax revenues every year...enough money to pay healthcare that could save 4 million children lives a year and employ enough teachers to get every African child into school (Oxfam 2016 cited in *africanews*, 18 January 2016. Available at <https://www.africanews.com/2016/01/18/30-per-cent-of-africa-s-wealth-held-offshore-oxfam/>) (Accessed 9 August 2020). With the 'inclusion of non-financial wealth' of the elite, Africa loses as much as USD 60 billion tax annually (Mykhalchenko, N. 2018. Review of Fjeldstad, Odd-Helge, Jacobsen, S.K, Ringstad, P.H. & Ngowi, H.P. 2017. *Lifting the veil of secrecy: Perspectives on international taxation and capital flight from Africa*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute. Available at <http://roape.net/2018/09/20/lifting-the-veil-on-capital-flight-and-tax-havens-in-africa/>) (Accessed 9 August 2020). The 'Plunder Route to Panama' report- an investigation by a consortium of African journalists inspired by the Panama Papers – finds:

..Africa's leaders are doing more than accepting bribes from foreign companies or evading tax. Rather, they are systematically setting up power structures run by favored friends or family members to steal billions of dollars and store the loot outside of their countries

Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/panama-papers-africas-elite-are-plundering-their-countries/a-41004488> (Accessed 7 August 2020) (website no longer accessible)

<sup>7</sup> Osborne, D. E. & Gaebler, T. 1992, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. New York: Plume

productive capacity. Mazzucato and Quaggiotto (2020) term it ‘*The Big Failure of Small Government*’ (2020, emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

Politicians, officials, academic and researchers in Africa confront texts and theories blind and deaf to ‘their own history, lived experiences – and their dreams’ with ‘little exposure to their own continent and all its complexity’ (Heleta, 2016)<sup>9</sup>. When Africa appears in the curriculum, it is, argues Mamdani (2008), ‘little more than a version of the continent offered by apartheid’s Bantu education system – where students are ‘taught a curriculum which presumes that Africa begins at the Limpopo...and that this Africa has no intelligentsia worth reading’ (cited in Heleta, 2016).

Numerous government and public policy schools in South Africa – and abroad – not unsurprisingly, routinely generate idiot savants who wax voluminously about what ‘good governance’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’, ‘participation’ etc., what ‘ought to’ or ‘should be’, and proceed to dazzle with complex(ity-stripping) models, diagrams, and organograms. Notably, many of the models are constructed on epistemologies of certainty’ where ‘often what passes as knowledge is little more than *opinion*’ (Utting, 2006:7, emphasis added)<sup>10</sup>, prejudice and delusion of the wealthy and powerful.

So, for example, ‘good governance’ is touted as universally good – motherhood and apple pie – with little to no attention paid to its origins and motivations. But in an authoritative survey of the now developed economies, Chang (2002)<sup>11</sup> demonstrates that the strictures of ‘good governance’ (and representative democracy) – including clean and efficient bureaucracy and judiciary; protection of property rights, contracts and patents; good corporate governance institutions; and an independent central bank was the outcome rather than the cause of economic development in the now-developed countries.

The current demand for the south to adopt world-class institutions of ‘good governance’ immediately is at odds with historical experience of the developed countries. Political economists have demonstrated that the ‘good governance’ regime has ‘fatally’ damaged the ‘possibility of creating a developmental transformation state’ (Khan, 2004:188).<sup>12</sup> ‘Good governance’ is, it is argued, profoundly anti-developmental (Khan, 2004) compared to the previous ‘bad policies’ of the now developed countries, where until 1913, and beyond, universal suffrage and secret balloting was a novelty; there was widespread nepotism and corruption in the public sector; corporate governance institutions fell miserably short of modern standards; competition law was non-existent; banking regulation was underdeveloped and patchy in most countries; insider trading and stock price manipulation was common; income tax was a still a novelty; labor legislation regarding working hours, occupational safety, child and female labor

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<sup>8</sup> Mazzucato, M. & Quaggiotto, G. 2020. The Big Failure of Small Government. *Project Syndicate*, 19 May (Available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/small-governments-big-failure-covid19-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-giulio-quaggiotto-2020-05?barrier=accesspaylog> (Accessed 28 May 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Heleta, S. 2016. Decolonisation: academics must change what they teach, and how? *The Conversation*, 20 November (Available at <https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080>) (Accessed 4 August 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Utting, P. 2006. Introduction: Reclaiming Development Agendas. In P.Utting (ed.). *Reclaiming Development Agendas: Knowledge, Power and International Policymaking*. New York: Palgrave, pp.1-24

<sup>11</sup> Chang, H-J. 2002. *Kicking away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. London: Anthem Press

<sup>12</sup> Khan, M. 2004. State Failure in Developing Countries and Institutional Reform Strategies. In B.Tungodden, N.Stern & I.Kolstad (eds). *Toward Pro-Poor Policies: Aid, Institutions, and Globalization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 165-196

standards were patchy, coverage limited and enforcement poor, trade barriers, infant industry protection, export subsidies, violation of patents, etc. (Chang, 2002). The ‘governance’ regimes in East Asia were clientelistic and marked by ‘extensive cronyism’ but ‘compatible with heightened levels of productive investment and dynamic growth’ (Mkandawire 1998:11).<sup>13</sup> Then there is the more recent work on patrimonialism, which shows that under certain political conditions, patrimonialism is developmental. Rwanda, for example, is not the poster child of ‘good governance’ (Khan & Pillay, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Put differently, ‘bad policies’, ‘bad governance’ and ‘neopatrimonialism’ can be developmental.

This messy reality notwithstanding, academics continue utilizing disembodied models, diagrams and international ‘best practice’ - often little more than opinion and universally good - testing against specific data and/or cases, leading to a confirmation of the original decontextualized hypothesis, and arriving at a conclusion that ‘reality’ is wrong, For example, the failure to implement a policy is often blamed on the absence of ‘political will’. So public policy authorities and practitioners recommend more (quantum?), improved or determined ‘political will’ to overcome the lack of ‘political will’; this tautology parading as expert advice steers clear from the, more appropriate, yet, controversial and untidy ‘political interest’.<sup>15</sup>

Maybe now is also the time to re-think our slavish adherence to traditional literary, academic and bibliographical conventions (Khoza-Shangase, 2019)<sup>16</sup>; the adherence to received and imposed writing formats, conventions and protocols codified in customized structured headings and narratives – that is, literature review, research design and methods, legislation, data collection and analysis, results and discussion? This ‘paint by numbers’ format where ‘research methodology’ is nothing more than a glorified ‘project management toolkit’ seals the fate and future of the idiot savants.

Academics and students seem content with elaborating sophisticated and elegant models, diagrams and organograms, disconnected from local and global struggles against religious nationalism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, oligarchy, autocracy and plutocracy. Why are our academics and students so familiar with the fine details of strategic management, performance management, monitoring and evaluation, human resource development, public value, research methods and sampling techniques but deaf to the struggles and blind to the poverty, inequality, unemployment, hunger and the daily deprivations and degradations of those who do not feature in grand white papers, grey strategy documents, deadening guidelines, and hetero-normative dusty textbooks?

The toppling and forced removal of the statues of slave traders and criminals and human rights violators around the world – and at universities - the general revolt against colonial iconography and supremacy in

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<sup>13</sup> Mkandawire, T. 1998. Thinking about developmental states in Africa. *Paper presented at a United Nations University workshop on Institutions and Development in Africa*. Available at: [http://www.unu.edu/hq/academic/pg\\_area4/Mkandawire.html](http://www.unu.edu/hq/academic/pg_area4/Mkandawire.html) (Accessed 9 March 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Khan, F. & Pillay, P. 2020. Corruption and its Repercussions on Employment, Poverty and Inequality: Rwanda and South Africa Compared. *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics*, 2019, 8, 1-10

<sup>15</sup> The deconstruction of ‘political will’ suggests that it is, more often than not, escape hatch for planning elites and policy wonks to invoke when intentions and projects fail. It is a political-academic ‘will-of-the-wisp’ better replaced by ‘political interest’ by which is meant society’s capacity to organize, make and implement decisions through contested social relations. This has deep sociological roots and political agendas that ‘political will’ will have to address in an often confrontational and/or conflictual manner.

<sup>16</sup> Khoza-Shangase, K. 2019. Intellectual and emotional toxicity: Where a cure does not appear to be imminent. In G.Khunou, H.Canham, K.Khoza-Shangase & E.D.Phaswana. (eds.) *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, pp. 42-64

curricula and academic disciplines (even at Oxford University) and the Black Lives Matter-led global protests impact public policy – as discipline and subject – profoundly and directly. This demands that public policy teaching and learning rapidly re-align and re-orientate itself to the immediate global pedagogical imperatives of the unfolding present which includes epistemic disobedience, trespass and democratization. This re-alignment and re-orientation can no longer be postponed if public policy wants to: firstly, serve the majority excluded from grand, grey and dead constitutions, polices and regulations; and secondly, to be in the play of history.

Vladimir Lenin once wrote: ‘There are decades when nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen’ (Dreyer, 2020).<sup>17</sup> COVID-19 is one such week, one such moment. The air is this thick with talk of the moment presenting potentials and possibilities of the pandemic offering a ‘portal’ (Roy, 2020)<sup>18</sup> to another world because ‘we cannot, we dare not go back to the “normal”’ (Dreyer, 2020):

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth ...trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality...Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next...We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (Roy, 2020).

Can public policy and government schools walk through portal with knowledge that is not neutral, not universally applicable and not removed from location? Is it any surprise, then, why the dominant public policy, teaching, learning and research frame and orientation is deaf and blind to the possibilities and potentialities not framed by Cartesian rationality (the mind as wholly separate from the corporeal body), teleological (focusing on the foreseeable end goal), and universal reasoning (the idea of only one possible/single rationality)?

A future public policy must dislodge the epistemic privilege of the First World/West/north as the norm where white knowledge and white history define and govern thought, prescription and action. This means dislodging the anchors and unseating the authors of university curricula, which, validates and affirms ‘white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews’[sic] – expressed ‘through colonial knowledge systems... designed to degrade, exploit and subjugate people in Africa and other parts of the formerly colonized world’ (Heleta, 2016). A future public policy must of necessity expose the silences of western epistemology – and epistemological certainty - and affirm the histories and epistemic rights of the excluded and devalued. Public policy teaching and learning must be urgently reframed to include political economy, critical race theory, gender studies, ethnography and culture, development sociology, etc. privileging real lives and lived realities of poor people over inappropriate, and increasingly irrelevant models, modelling and academic hierarchies.

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<sup>17</sup> Dreyer, N. 2020. It’s time to choose the world we want. *Sunday Times*, 26 April

<sup>18</sup> Roy, A. 2020. The pandemic is a portal’. *Financial Times*, 3 April. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> (Accessed 5 April 2020)

What might such a public policy discipline and subject look like – its curriculum and pedagogy in the unchartered territory of the present when orthodoxies are melting in the air? What are the skills, capabilities and competencies that our students, administrators, and governors need if we are to walk through the portal leaving behind our prejudices, discriminations and daily dehumanizations? Can we leave behind our dead data banks and ideas and imagine another world or will it be a case of plus c'est la même chose?