


OP-ED

It's time we academics climbed out of our Western ivory towers and embraced new ways of thinking

By Firoz Khan • 12 August 2020



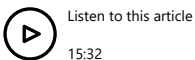
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Academics and students seem content with elaborating sophisticated and elegant models, diagrams and organograms, disconnected from local and global struggles against religious nationalism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, oligarchy, autocracy and plutocracy.

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The call for an alternative approach to the studying and teaching of public administration, defined by (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/public-administration-uk/>). Emeritus Professor of Government at the University of Manchester, Colin Talbot, as the “architecture for government and the delivery of its policies” – in the global South – is an old one. But in the recent past and unfolding present, the global protests against systemic racism, systemic 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, the question is asked: 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 stigmatises and denigrates all other (non-Western) knowledge as custom, magic, ancestry, anecdotal, parochial, provincial, situated, pre- and un-scientific?

Academics and researchers are often oblivious to the fact that “scientific” research – its neutrality, its universality, and its objectivity – is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism (<https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/decolonizing-methodologies/>). (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and Empire. Even the transdisciplinary research clergy, praise singers and



cheerleaders have, as [Prof Lesley le Grange says \(https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/102507\)](https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/102507), “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”.

Black Lives Matter-led global protests are pitted, among 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 protests worldwide occur in a world economy suffering from a “[unique combination of supply and demand shocks \(https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2020-07-30-anthony-butler-predictions-not-rosy-about-sa-in-a-post-covid-world/\)](https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2020-07-30-anthony-butler-predictions-not-rosy-about-sa-in-a-post-covid-world/)” with the International Monetary Fund expecting a 3% global contraction over the course of the year.

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 impoverisation – “one hundred million more people could be pushed into extreme poverty” because of the pandemic – with the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, [anticipating \(https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech\)](https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterres-full-speech) “famines of historic proportions”.

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The questions then are: is public policy and its teaching and learning awake and alert to the present zeitgeist in the streets, universities and lecture halls? And, 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 informalisation; dysfunctional and uncompetitive markets; pervasive predation by hyper-financialised public and private elites; corruption and destructive (vs productive) rent-seeking; etc.

It has long been argued that the Western canon and Northern models of public policy and administration care 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: depoliticisation, deregulation, downsizing – [Osborne and Gaebler-style \(https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.4050130113\)](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.4050130113) – 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 productive capacity. [Mazzucato and Quaggiotto \(https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/small-governments-big-failure-covid19-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-giulio-quaggiotto-2020-05?barrier=accesspaylog\)](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/small-governments-big-failure-covid19-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-giulio-quaggiotto-2020-05?barrier=accesspaylog) term it “*The Big Failure of Small Government*” (2020, emphasis added).

The current demand for the South to adopt world-class institutions’ “good governance” immediately is at odds with historical experience of the developed countries.

Politicians, officials, academics and researchers in Africa confront texts and theories, as [Savo Heleta writes \(https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080\)](https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080), blind and deaf to “their own history, lived experiences – and their dreams” with “little exposure to their own continent and all its complexity”. When Africa appears in the curriculum, it is, argues [Mahmood Mamdani \(http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02533959808458649\)](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02533959808458649), “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”.

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” are, what “ought to” or “should be”, and proceed to dazzle with complexity-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*”, (Peter Utting ([http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpPublications\)/046EA1E5A3613DC6C125717E0045A592?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/046EA1E5A3613DC6C125717E0045A592?OpenDocument)), 2006:7, emphasis added), 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, Ha-Joon Chang (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40722165?seq=1>) 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 were the outcome rather than the cause of economic development in the now-developed countries.

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Political economists like Mushtaq Khan (<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3683/>) have demonstrated that the “good governance” regime has “fatally” damaged the “possibility of creating a developmental transformation state” (Khan, 2004:188). “Good governance”, Khan argues, is profoundly anti-developmental 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 still a novelty; labour legislation regarding working hours, occupational safety, child and female labour standards were patchy, coverage limited and enforcement poor, trade barriers, infant industry protection, export subsidies, violation of patents, etc.

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.

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 (http://www.unu.edu/hq/academic/pg_area4/Mkandawire.html)). 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 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338193275_Corruption_and_its_Repercussions_on_Employment_Poverty_and_Inequ)). Put differently, “bad policies”, “bad governance” and “neopatrimonialism” can be developmental.

This messy reality notwithstanding, academics continue utilising 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 decontextualised 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”.

Maybe now is also the time to rethink our slavish adherence to traditional literary, academic and bibliographical conventions (Khoza-Shangase, 2019 (https://www.hsrepress.ac.za/uploads/files/BAV_eBook.pdf)); the adherence to received and imposed writing formats, conventions and protocols codified in customised 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.

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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 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 which include epistemic disobedience, trespass and democratisation.

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, policies 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.” Covid-19 is one such week, one such moment. The air is thick with talk of this moment presenting potentials and possibilities of the pandemic offering, as [Arundhati Roy puts it \(https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca\)](https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca), a “portal” to another world because “we cannot, we dare not go back to the ‘normal’ ”:

“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.”

Can public policy and government schools walk through the 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, as [Heleta writes \(https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080\)](https://theconversation.com/decolonisation-academics-must-change-what-they-teach-and-how-68080), “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 colonised world”.

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.

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 dehumanisations?

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*? **DM**

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