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Strawmen and the Decolonisation of the Academy

For this piece I take as my point of departure Biko Agozino's response to a series of questions posed by a member of the audience, to a panel he was a member of during this time in New Zealand. The panel in question was part of the launch of a new journal, *Decolonisation of Criminology and Justice*, at AUT University, Auckland in June 2018. Biko was invited to give a speech at the launch of the journal, and participate in a panel discussion on the broad theme of 'decolonising criminology and criminal justice'.

During the panel discussion a member of the audience asked a number of questions including a) given that the members of the panel themselves represent different peoples, one from the 'African context', one being Maori, another an African American woman and another with a Pacifica perspective, all of whose peoples had different experiences of colonisation then how do these different perspectives and experiences "mesh with a journal of this sort", and as such "how are you [the editors] going to align that [the different perspectives and experiences]"; and b) given that this journal is in a "white space", a space you are supposed to be critiquing, how are the people most effected by criminology, who are not in this space, they have no access to this, how are their voices to be heard"?

Biko began his response to the questions by acknowledging that at its base was the issue of *historical specificity*, stating that "everything has to be analysed with attention to historical

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specificity. That does not mean you have to experience the history in order to study it, analyse it, and then intervene on the part of social justice” (see Agozino 2003). He further stated that:

“If that were the case then no criminologist would be qualified to teach criminology because the qualification to teach crime would be that you had to be a criminal first. To experience it before you can understand it”.

In response to the first question I agree with Biko’s contention that while the issue of historical specificity is important, but to the argument that the journal needs to reconcile ‘different experiences’ of colonialism as a process of dispossession, there simply is no need to do so. This kind of argument creates an artificial barrier that, if taken seriously, will simply turn our attention away from the focus of the journal, namely, to challenge the colonial bases of the academy and the state controlled criminal justice system. As Biko also stated in response to this question, one does not need to experience to analyse, or to research and to comment. Nor does anyone who wishes to publish in the new journal need to expend copious amounts of energy and text on explaining how their peoples experiences of colonisation differs/is similar to other people’s experiences of colonialism, unless of course that is the specific focus of their article (see Tauri 2016 for broader discussion of this issue).

And now to the claim made by the audience member that the new journal we were launching is part of the ‘white space’ (I imagine they were referring of the Academy) we are supposed to be critiquing. The argument was that because it is part of a ‘white space’ that those affected by a rapaciousness academic criminology and criminal justice system, are unlikely to access it, or for their voices to be ‘heard’ in it.

In response I say that the claim that the journal is part of a 'white space' is an example of the construction of a strawman argument. Such a claim, if true, would indeed devalue any potential part the journal might play in struggle to decolonise two of the most violent colonial projects of the 20th and 21st centuries, academic criminology, and the criminal justice systems of settler colonialism (Agozino 2010, Monchalin 2016). To infer that the world of academic journals is a 'white space' is to ignore the long history of Indigenous/colonised peoples establishing their own journals, their own publication houses, in other words, their own avenues through which we privilege the experiences of our peoples; their experiences of racism, genocide, and colonisation.

My guess is that the editorial boards of The African Journal of Criminal Justice and Criminology, AlterNative, MAI Journal, International Indigenous Policy Journal, and the Journal of Global Indigeneity, would be bemused that their journals were functioning purely in a 'white space', and at the clear inference that Indigenous-driven and focused avenues of publishing are automatically constrained from playing meaningful part in the decolonisation struggle. I submit that even a cursory glance at the quality and focus of the material published in these journals demonstrates the short-sightedness of the inferences that form the basis of this question.

And finally, in response to the concern expressed that the journal will not be accessible to the 'voiceless'. This is yet another strawman argument as the same can be said of any academic journal that even remotely touches on social justice issues. If this concern were taken seriously then activist academics like myself would never become involved in projects like this one. Instead, our political activities would be reserved for the 'public' sphere and removed from the academy because any such activity in that sphere would be 'inauthentic'. I reject any such

argument: our removal from direct action against the academy, including utilising the tools it has developed to silence us, simply cannot be allowed to happen; especially given the academy's long history of support for the settler colonial state and its subjugation of Indigenous peoples.

References

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