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Demarcation and definition: Explicating the meaning and scope of 'decolonisation' in the social and political sciences

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Abstract

Decolonisation of the curriculum is a burgeoning yet controversial project of radical change, gaining slow but steady traction in higher education politics departments across the country. At its heart is the acknowledgement and systematic unravelling of colonial and imperial practices in the UK University system. This article pins down what decolonisation is and is not, highlighting the barriers and tentative opportunities to effective decolonisation work. This is discussed in the context of the structural constraints critical scholars of race, particularly those at the intersection of marginalised racial and gender identities, work against in the academy.

Keywords Anticolonial, antiracism, diversity, decolonisation, neo-liberalism

Introduction

Decolonisation may be considered a buzzword in the social sciences as it stands. Moves for University departments to diversify reading lists and overhaul recruitment practices to foster greater diversity are already underway at higher education institutions across the world under the aegis of 'decolonisation'. There are sticking points, however, when it comes to the decolonial project. As burgeoning scholars in the politics and sociology of race, it is arguably our responsibility to ask the uncomfortable questions as decolonisation becomes more institutionalised and potentially less transformative.

In our piece for the Political Studies Review, we reflected on our positionalities as well as the wider movements for decolonisation happening across the world to understand what it would

take to effectively decolonise political science curricula in the UK. Our disillusionment in that piece was underscored by the response from Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick Akwugo Emejulu: 'I have little faith that the discipline will attempt to decolonise. Observing how little has changed in political science in the midst of the economic and Mediterranean crises and the far right backlash – there is too much invested in the usual obscuring narratives – even as liberalism has consistently shown us its limitations – for the change that is needed to encounter the world differently'.ⁱ

Consensus seems to be shifting towards the opinion, quite rightly, that decolonisation doesn't only lie in adding more women and scholars of colour to reading lists. It entails a forensic understanding and critique of where, how, why and by whom 'legitimate' knowledge is produced and, as Emejulu highlighted, the way this knowledge does or does not reflect ongoing global political crises and ideological shifts around the world and their effect on sub-altern populations. It is also an ongoing and reflexive process, given the way inequalities are embedded, produced and reproduced in the academy.

This article will flesh out what the authors mean by the idea of 'decolonisation', setting it apart from organisational discourses based around 'diversity' which have simultaneously proliferated alongside or within discourses on decolonisation. It will then discuss the potential scope of decolonisation across the University system and barriers to both its symbolic and practical adoption within the academy. It will reflect again on our own positionalities within the academy and the constraints and opportunities we, as young, female, minority ethnic scholars of race, face in implementing and advancing the decolonisation project in a meaningful way. Our recommendations will focus on the need for genuine if uncomfortable critical reflection, collective agency, and a dose of tempered optimism.

What do we mean by decolonisation?

Academics have a requirement to expound the concept of 'decolonisation' with the same intellectual and critical rigour they apply to other objects in their academic enquiries. Scholars of race arguably harbour even more responsibility in defining what decolonisation means in both conceptual and practical terms, given the inextricability of the anticolonial and the antiracist struggle. At the forefront of critical theories of race, our role is to stimulate informed dialogue on the subject not only with colleagues and managers outside of our disciplinary subject areas, but with students and those that exist beyond our walls - policymakers, researchers, politicians, think tanks, NGOs, and all those who have the sort of real world impact that is lacking and increasingly coveted within the academy.

For some, decolonisation is the 'new-old' diversity. For others – and for us, the authors - it means the exposure of the material, intellectual and symbolic colonialism that abounds in the University system, the 'home of the coloniser'ⁱⁱ, and recognising, as Black writer, feminist and activist Audre Lorde stated, that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.ⁱⁱⁱ Decolonisation requires a critical historical lens and a transformative approach to knowledge-building, to expose and dismantle the presence of colonial and imperial practices within the university as they pertain to current divisions of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. The diversity project, in contrast to this, is far less offensive. Most Universities now proudly yet banally claim that their institutions foster 'inclusive' workspaces, value 'different perspectives', and create a 'supportive environment' for critical work. Psychology Professor Malose Mackhubela, talking from the perspective of the South African academy, frames the diversification project as a tool for 'ideological pacification' as per philosopher Slavoj Žižek's theorisations of social control, setting it both practically and conceptually apart from the explicitly antiracist approach which decolonisation demands.^{iv}

It is important to understand, however, how different academic institutions operate in order to understand the situated nature of colonial practices. Oxford University has garnered inordinate amounts of negative press as the epicentre of the Rhodes must Fall campaign, but both Russell group *and* post-1992 Universities are implicated in the colonial biases embedded in the UK university system. Institutional racisms and white privilege are just as deep-seated in the 'expensive new architectural extensions' which house the 'Black, Asian and White working classes'^v - as opposed to the global elite - in multicultural 'new' universities which promise future success in exchange for extortionate fees. Despite the celebrated diversity of the student body in these institutions, they still represent the marketisation of higher education where more students, whoever they may be, represent more profit. Despite our elaborate, eloquent, peer-reviewed critiques of neoliberal capitalism and the myth of meritocracy, these are at play at the heart of our universities, both red brick and new build.

The scope of the decolonisation project

Both inside and outside the academy, anti-Blackness and pro-Empire thought abounds. Our *Political Studies Review* article on decolonising the curriculum^{vi} cited a YouGov poll from 2014^{vii} which found that 59 per cent respondents thought the British Empire should be something to be proud of. If decolonisation at its heart is the undoing of colonialism, what do we say to those working amongst us who consign that period of history firmly to the past, and may even look fondly upon it? We live with an acute sense of irony that those of us who work

on postcolonial and feminist perspectives do so 'within those same academic environments that actively thwart the realisation of the ideals put forward in these critical traditions'.^{viii} The academics most radical in their writings can also be the first to uphold the racist and hetero-patriarchal underpinnings of their institutions, siloed as they are within their ideological camps and defensive towards the systems which maintain their own privilege.

Some argue that decolonisation is the domain of sociologists, 'left with the residue of problems that were no longer of concern'^{ix} to economists and political scientists. Decolonisation is, however, everyone's problem. Decolonisation entails an audit of the practices of higher education institutions, from staff recruitment and retention to promotion and advancement, to the expansion and investment practices of the University. Decolonisation of the curriculum, specifically, needs to be implemented across all areas, in all disciplines: theory, research design, methods, ethics, pedagogy. It requires looking both inwards and outwards, accepting that there is more than one way of speaking about, thinking about, and researching the complex social and political phenomena bound up within our disciplines^x.

Collective agency

Calls for decolonisation have largely been student-led, garnering relatively large levels of media coverage (as mentioned earlier with regards to #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Oxford). Universities have a history of ignoring or appeasing rather than meaningfully engaging with students' political demands, however, so again we must be wary about expecting meaningful change 'from above'. As Simukai Chigudu, a founding member of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, pleaded in a recently published book by key actors in the movement: 'For academics and administrators, I implore you to take your students seriously. You may not like their language and their tactics. But protest does not come from nowhere. It is born of frustration and anger. This is an occasion for radical empathy and patient listening and not casual dismissal'.^{xi} Students, particularly the working-class Black and minority ethnic students that comprise the majority of the student body in post-1992 Universities, are - in a decolonised classroom - co-creators of critical knowledge and must be regarded as such. It is heartening to see our first-year undergraduate students engaging in debate about, for instance, the modalities of racism in contemporary society. Their experiential knowledge and political passions are palpable, despite their relative lack of academic credentials.

Academics are, as aforementioned, key to the intellectual struggle. However, scholars of race are stretched few and far between in politics departments. Many - like us, the authors - are only burgeoning early career academics, minoritised both by race and gender in our

institutions, with memories of studenthood and economic precarity not far behind us. Race scholars Shirley Anne Tate and Paul Bagguley propose that the dominance of those racialised as White in the academy is in part due to the lack of progression of Black and minority ethnic students into the academic workforce. They state that one 'particular paradox here is that whilst black and ethnic minority students are more likely than white students to study for a taught Master's, they are less likely to move on to a PhD^{xii} which is considered the first step on the academic career ladder. To them, the hypocrisy of such enduring inequality against a backdrop of so-called liberal virtues of equality, fairness and meritocracy are indicative of the astounding extent of structural racism in the academy. Most of our female academic colleagues are also acutely aware of the burden of emotional labour in education – the need to regulate one's own emotions and the emotions of others as part of one's job - falling on young female staff. The commodification and gendered exploitation of emotion work^{xiii} is a situation all too familiar to us, the authors, as we seek to navigate the emotional, professional and structural constraints of the academy, alongside our own political projects.

Many scholars in the social sciences are still loathe to take lessons from standpoint theorists, to acknowledge the need for reflexive research, to interrogate the provenance of their data, to encourage their students to foster a critical eye and to share the knowledge production process: 'Decolonising knowledge production, understood as an on-going process, calls for transforming the relation between teachers and students, bringing to question research norms and moving towards forms of knowledge co-production'^{xiv}. Decolonisation has been misread, by many, as a move to dismiss Enlightenment scholarship which has formed the basis of much of the classical political thought taught across Politics modules in the UK. Dr Meera Subaratnam, Chair of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group, had to clarify that demands from students in 2017 for more interrogation of the epistemological biases in the work of White philosophers was not a call for their systematic removal from syllabuses but 'for a greater representation of non-European thinkers, as well as better historical awareness of the contexts in which scholarly knowledge has been produced'^{xv}. We must believe, for the purposes of optimism in the social justice project that is decolonisation, that this is a reasonable aim that academics of all ilk can get on board with.

Conclusion

There is acute irony in the fact that professional and structural barriers to implementing decolonisation in the academy is one of the key reasons as to why it is so sorely needed. An open-minded and collective approach, that transcends academic hierarchies and the teacher-student divide, can ensure that calls for change have sufficient weight and are not seen as an

ideological plea from a (predominantly minoritised) minority of academics. We believe that the application of a critical lens through which to look at political scholarship, decentring 'classical' literature as 'foundational' to its study and introducing the theoretical work of global scholars of colour can, if adopted readily, enhance both critical pedagogy and research. Subaratnam (2018) states that eurocentrism in even the *critical* politics of the international 'closes down rather than opens up alternative ways of thinking the international'.^{xvi} That the scope for decolonised thinking within politics presents multi-layered and unbounded, if gruelling, opportunity for emancipatory theoretical and methodological work is, in our opinion, a challenge and a mission that we should all be prepared to embark on - for the sake of the discipline, the academy, our own scholarship, and our students.

ⁱ A. Emejulu, 'Can Political Science Decolonise? A Response to Neema Begum and Rima Saini', *Political Studies Review*. Vol. 17, no. 2, 2018. pp. 202-206.

ⁱⁱ G. K. Bhambra, K. Nisancioglu and D. Gebrial. eds. *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto Press. 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Lorde, *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. London: Penguin Books. 1984

^{iv} M. Makhubela, "Decolonise, don't diversify": Discounting diversity in the South African academe as a tool for ideological pacification. *Education as Change*, vol. 22, no. 1. 2018. pp. 1-21

^v H. S. Mirza, Racism in Higher Education: 'What Then, Can Be Done?' in J. Arday and H. S. Mirza (eds.) *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2018. p. 6.

^{vi} N. Begum and R. Saini, Decolonising the Curriculum. *Political Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 2. 2019. pp. 196-201

^{vii} YouGov, The British Empire is 'Something to be Proud of'. 2014. Available at:

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire/> [Accessed 28 October 2019].

^{viii} S. Withaecx, Weakening the Institutional Wall: Reflections on Race, Gender and Decolonisation in Belgian academy. *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*. Vol. 6, no. 1. 2019. p. 25.

^{ix} G. K. Bhambra, Sociology and Postcolonialism: another 'Missing' Revolution? *Sociology*. Vol. 41, no. 5. 2005. p. 875

^x M. Sabaratnam, IR in Dialogue... but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. Vol. 39, no. 2. 2011. pp. 781-803

^{xi} S. Chigudu. Codrington Conference: What is to be done? In B. Kwoba, R. Chantiluke and A. Nkopo (eds.) *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*. 2018. London: Zed Books

^{xii} S. A. Tate and P. Bagguley, Building the anti-racist university: next steps. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. Vol. 20, no. 3. 2017. p. 292.

^{xiii} J. Blackmore, Jill. Doing 'Emotional Labour' in the Education Market Place: Stories from the Field of Women in Management. *Discourse: Studies in The Cultural Politics of Education*. Vol. 17. 1996. pp. 337-349.

^{xiv} S. de Jong, R. Icaza, R. Vazquez and S. Withaecx. Editorial: Decolonising the University. *Tijdschrift voor Gender studies*. Vol. 20, no. 3. 2017. p. 229.

^{xv} M. Sabaratnam, Decolonising the curriculum: what's all the fuss about? [Blog]. 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/9> [Accessed 28 October 2019]

^{xvi} M. Sabaratnam, M. 2013. Avatars of Eurocentrism in the critique of the liberal peace. *Security Dialogue*. Vol. 44, no. 3. 2013. p. 260.