What decolonising the curriculum means: Reflections by students of Politics and International Relations at London Metropolitan University.

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Introduction

As a subject area, Politics and International Relations is dominated by a Western-centric view of the world. Many of the textbooks and journals are predominantly written by Western authors (mostly white men) and tend to focus on the traditional issues, ideas and historical experiences of Europe and the West. Where the disciplines might draw on the experience of Ancient Greece and Rome as the foundation of Politics or the building blocks of International Relations, there is little room for ancient China, India, or the African continent, even if their experiences and histories support or refute, or add nuances to, supposed Western universal experiences and truths.

Working in a university that has one of the most diverse student populations in the UK, with a high level of black and ethnic minority students, it is clear that the traditional curriculums of the West often do not reflect the interests of our students, and, equally importantly, they do not see themselves reflected in the subject matter. Students' lived experience is often not present.

This paper reflects on a student conference held by the Subject Area of Politics and International Relations at London Metropolitan University focused on decolonising the curriculum.

The problem of a Western ethnocentric lens.

Joseph Nye and Sean Lynn-Jones (1988: 27) argue there are a set of 'ethnocentric biases' that shape the subject areas of Politics and International Relations that can be attributed to the dominance of the United States since the Second World War. This has shaped debates focused on 'superpower rivalry, nuclear arms control, and American policy debates' whilst neglecting 'many equally significant issues' such as 'regional security issues (apart from Western Europe), domestic politics, and economic security'.

Ken Booth argued that this resulted in an inability to 'see the world through the eyes of a different national or ethnic group'. For Booth, this led to an arrogance in Western thinking which suggested that 'the way something is done in other societies is inferior to the way it is done in one's own society' (Booth, 1979: 15). Perhaps one of the most influential expressions of this came with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1989), which argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union had seen Western Liberal values triumph to the point that the World would rush to embrace them. Though this would be questioned, controversially, by Samuel Huntington's 'The Clash of

Civilisation' thesis (1993) and then by the tragic events of 9/11, which was a direct attack on the symbols of Western power, the assumption in the early part of the 21st Century was that the Western way was the only way.

It does not take much research to discover, however, that the non-Western world has made important contributions to Politics and International Relations theories and concepts. There has been important work on the rise of internal conflicts, the salience of non-military threats, and the emergence of new world powers such as China and India by non-Western academics. (See, for example: Acharya, A., 2014; Johnston, A. I., 1995; and Bajpai, K., et. al., 2014; Mahbubani, K., 2013; Khanna, P., 2019.)

I teach a module focused on Contemporary Strategy which begins with the ideas of the Chinese strategist Sun-tzu, who lived 2,500 years ago (Sun-tzu, 2009) and whose writings are taught today in Chinese classrooms and military academies. Traditionally such a course would begin with 'On War' by the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz (1982). Sun-tzu is the more popular subject for students, not just because of its accessibility but because of the opportunity to see the world through a non-Western lens.

Indeed, if we accept that major changes are occurring in the world that will see power shift away from the West, with the US and Europe becoming simply two powers amongst many as they are challenged by an increasing number of states, notably China, (see, for example: Ferguson, 2011, Haass, R., 2017; Jacques, 2012; Kaplan, 2018; Kupchan, C., 2012) it would make sense that the discipline, and by implication the curriculum we teach in universities, moves away from its Western, ethnocentric focus and embraces other World views to enable students to understand the profound changes that are occurring and what this might mean for the West, and to appreciate that there are other Worldviews.

The killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed throughout the US and across the world, and the pulling down of the statute of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, created an interesting discussion in a Level 4 undergraduate Politics and International Relations (PIR) class at London Metropolitan University. Students noted that in secondary school, they tended to learn about the British Empire from what one called 'a triumphant perspective', or the existence of slavery from its ending by Wilberforce. The beginning of slavery and its role in fuelling the industrial revolution, and the empire, was ignored.

The pulling down of the statue of Colston opened up an interesting debate about who or what should replace it? When it was suggested a statue be put up to remember those who boycotted the Bristol Omnibus Company in 1963 when they refused to hire Guy Bailey because he was black, students in the room had never heard about this event. They knew about Rosa Parks who began the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 because that was on the school curriculum. But Guy Bailey? (See, for example, Eddo-Lodge, 2018.)

The Beginnings of a Conversation

In recent years we have widened the PIR curriculum to include African Politics, Latin American Politics, gender, sexuality, migration, and the growing diasporas in the world. But, having spoken to

students informally in classes over the last couple of years, it became clear that there was more we could do.

As a result, in early 2020, just after the UK went into its first lockdown, I organised an online conference with students to begin a conversation about what they would like to see on the curriculum, how PIR could reflect more the interests and needs of the diverse student community, and what they believed was meant by decolonising the curriculum.

In total 28 students attended, the vast majority of whom were BAME students. Four members of the teaching staff were present, as were two members of the Learning Centre.

In advance of the meeting, students and staff were provided with materials which were designed to provide background to the session. Each offered an interpretation of what decolonising the curriculum meant for both students and staff.

The first was from an instructive guide to decolonising the curriculum on the University of Bath's teaching hub:

> *'To decolonise means looking at what we teach, how we position what we teach in its context, and how we are positioned as teachers and learners, especially in relation to others who may not share this position and privilege. It considers how we challenge perspectives through critical engagement and challenges power and hierarchies in our learning and teaching. It involves addressing the legacy of empire and the history of disciplines, how knowledge was created and by whom.'*
>
> (The Learning and Teaching Hub Bath – 'Decolonising the Curriculum')

The second was an excerpt of an online discussion hosted by Advance HE on what is meant by a decolonised curriculum and why it is important. The speaker was a history student at University College London, Anne Kimunguyi:

> *'A colonial curriculum is characterised by its unrepresentative, inaccessible, and privileged nature. Unrepresentative, because it selectively constructs teachings which exclude certain, oftentimes, crucial narratives. Inaccessible, because it consequently prevents many of its recipients from identifying with the narratives construed, whilst appealing to a historically favoured demographic. Privileged, because it ensures the continued participation, comfort and flourish of this select group of people, in both an academic and a wider societal context. Sadly, and unacceptably, this all occurs at the detriment of a diverse range of marginalised voices.'*
>
> (Hack, K. 2020)

And, finally, an excerpt from a blog on decolonisation from SOAS that stated:

> 'It is accepted in many disciplines that in the past, assumptions regarding racial and civilizational hierarchy informed a lot of thinking about how the world worked, what was worth studying in it and how it should be studied…One interpretation of 'decolonising the

curriculum' means interrogating such assumptions, models and frameworks for these specific biases.'

(SOAS, 2017)

The session was broken down into five areas sections: 1. Course Content; 2. Resources; 3. Pedagogy; 4. Challenges; 5. Summary/Next steps

What became apparent during the discussion that followed was that for our students decolonising the curriculum was not just about the subject matter, but it was also about who is teaching, how it is being taught, and the implications for pedagogy and achievement in a diverse student community.

1. Course Content

Students were keen to examine the imperial past of Britain and the legacy of colonialism. This did not just mean the traditional view of the 'Scramble for Africa' or the rule of India. One student commented that 'the physical, economic and psychological strategy the UK employed during its empire days should be taught' as should 'the impact of the colonialism worldwide because it wasn't just Africa that was invaded… We don't learn about how Britain destroyed China via the Opium Wars.' It might, the student suggested, help us understand the way in which the Chinese perceive Britain in the 21st Century.

The question of legacy was important throughout the discussion, with one student commenting 'I believe we should have modules based on why the impact of colonialism is still important to this day as a lot of anti-black/anti-people of colour literature and propaganda has reinforced many views and stereotypes that still exist today.' This was reflected in a debate that then developed relating to social justice and contemporary social issues. Students demonstrated an awareness of the intersectionality of race in cutting across other issues, one stating ''We need to talk about, racism, sexism, LGBTQIA+ history, abortion, euthanasia and all the topics that are considered too "controversial" to talk about.'

Another noted when it comes to International Relations as a discipline, 'Conflict education on an international level is not just about war. One of the biggest conflicts will always be discrimination on so many levels.' Adding 'We need to look at how discrimination is the basis of many conflicts and how the different relationships between different countries is based on various factors, mainly discrimination.'

There was a criticism why so much time was spent on teaching the Cold War and events which to some felt too historical. Furthermore, as Mohamed Ayoob (1986) noted, Western academics and policymakers had inherent biases during the Cold War, refusing to recognise the severity of regional conflicts in the Developing World. These were seen as sideshows to a more serious strategic game being played by the superpowers, rather than acknowledging that most instances of international violence since the end of the Second World War have occurred in the Developing World, where the security concerns tend to be internal in nature, not external. (See also: Ayoob 1984; Azar and Moon, 1984; Rubenstein 1994.)

Perhaps, suggested students, it would be better to focus less on the struggle between East and West and more on the history of different countries, such as China, India and Japan. It is worth remembering that we are now teaching undergraduate students who were not alive when 9/11 occurred, who have no memory of the invasions of Afghanistan or Iraq, or barely remember the financial crash of 2008.

As one student powerfully noted, 'when we were studying non-violent methods of protest, I brought it up in class that the methods we were learning do not necessarily apply in African countries where demonstration could 80-90% result in loss of life through the armed forces who are supposed to protect citizens.'

There was also an appreciable awareness of nuance amongst students that decolonising the curriculum might mean different things to different people. Said one, 'The issues in the US are not necessarily our issues. There is a psychological scar that has been left by the transatlantic slave trade.' Many agreed with a student who said 'we need to understand the discrimination is mainly based on the lack of information and then amplified through the spread of propaganda and misinformation. This is why we need more access to unbiased education.'

2. Pedagogy

An interesting point was made by a number of students concerning assessments. 'I think there should be less penalisation on English grammatical errors in our coursework', said one. Another commented 'it would be good to know if the students feel that certain types of assessment disadvantage particular groups of students (i.e., do we need to decolonise assessment as well as content?).' One immediate result of this discussion was the creation of a BAME Students and Inclusive Curriculum Group which has examined all assessments offered across the university's School of Social Sciences, based on student feedback. The results are to be published in late 2021, after a successful presentation by students at the university's annual Teaching and Learning Conference.

3. Resources

The fact that most texts are written by Western academics, who are mostly men, was obvious to many students. 'The problem is that a lot of the people writing on Africa are not from Africa themselves or African scholars,' commented one student, 'so it ends up being from a Western perspective again.' Another argued that white writers have an inherent bias, whether conscious or not, suggesting 'we shouldn't just talk about the plight of African people and their victimisation but emphasise their achievements, and contributions to academia across all subjects and to society.'

The consensus was that a more diverse reading list was required, with students suggesting academic authors from 'Africa, Asia, China, and elsewhere'. After all, would it be acceptable if the majority of writings and teaching of women and gender relations were done by men, or those on the LGBTQIA+ community written by straight men and women?

But it was not just resources in terms of reading materials that students expressed a desire for. For many who was teaching was as important as what is being taught. 'We need more black professors!!!!!' and 'more BAME [teachers]' said one. Others suggested we invited more BAME guest speakers.

4. Challenges

Interestingly, there was also an acceptance that decolonising could prove to be challenging for some students and may even act as a trigger mechanism. 'I have sensed anger and aggression in lectures where inequality has been raised', said one student, adding, 'The students have a duty to discuss this subject objectively and not make it personal. If you want to be angry, have anger at the international system that still promotes beauty as mainly European, when there is beauty in all. Prosperity and empowerment is a global aspiration, not just a European one.'

Said another, ''I also notice that a few white students become very defensive when students of colour talk about the white saviour complex in regards to international development. This discomfort is nothing compared to what people of colour feel every day.'

There was a view that modules that examine race and racism, emancipation and development needed to be 'more mandatory [core] ones so [they] can't be dismissed as easily'. One student, making an observation that many in the room agreed with, said that 'it tends to be that those who are already interested or passionate about these topics that are more likely to choose these types of elective modules' ,whether they were BAME or white students. As a result, the feeling was that 'There needs to be a core module designed around various social issues. It will encourage a much broader perspective on the real world because politics is mainly based on social issues.'

5. Summary/Next Steps

What was encouraging was how students viewed their role within the university, and society more broadly. Here are just three comments that were made in the concluding discussions:

- 'Change to racism is ignited both domestically and internationally. As students we can channel change.'

- 'Schools and universities are the perfect place to properly educate students.'

- 'I intend to go back home and I would like to learn how to deal with situations in countries that are not true democracies or weak states, not just the West.'

Conclusions

For many students, having the opportunity to discuss decolonisation was an empowering experience and an opportunity to reflect on what has already been achieved in PIR and what needs to be done moving forwards. It has already led to co-created changes in the curriculum, incorporating much more on Post-Colonial and Decolonial theory, the origins of racism and how it has shaped International Relations. If the value of decolonising the curriculum is 'to challenge received wisdom, to ask questions about society and to generate the insight needed to change the world' (SOAS, 2017) it is clear that London Met students are up to that challenge and can help shape the future of the institution. As the last student to speak at the conference said, 'The university has been great in the work it does with BAME students' and it has a 'fantastic opportunity to do more.'

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