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FORUM ARTICLE

The politics of science: A postscript

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Abstract

This postscript deliberates the wider implications of decolonising the academy. It takes point of departure in the often-contentious public discourse on the topic and asks, why is the decolonisation agenda so concerning to public officials and the target of public policy? In many ways, derisive and irreverent responses to efforts to decolonise universities, schools, and the curricula is only expected seeing as it has the potential to disrupt the futures of the beneficiaries of colonial norms, practices, and institutions. But equally, the decolonisation agenda is contentious as it unsettles the assumption that scientific knowledge production is an apolitical affair. There are of course ample examples of scientific ‘progress’ being deeply indebted to histories and legacies of colonialism. However, it is in revealing this politics of science that decolonisation finds wider political relevance as not just an effort to recognise and remedy the legacies of colonisation in the academy. It also reveals the politics that is embedded in what we know and, in doing so, underlines the fallibility of a singular (scientific) frame, means of measurement, or rule of inference for understanding a social reality. In fact, decolonisation understood in this way is about opening up the possibility of acknowledging there isn’t a social reality. Every social phenomenon can be experienced in a multiplicity of ways and therefore reimagining IR in view of decolonising it requires a political response that empirically, methodologically, and theoretically forefronts the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that have thus far been marginalised in the studying and understanding of social realities.

Keywords: Colonialism; Decolonisation; Politics of Science; International Relations

The conversation on decolonising universities, schools, and the curricula has now breached the walls of the academy and become a wider societal concern. It appeared, for instance, in the UK Parliament in early 2021 when Minister of State for Universities Michelle Donelan called the decolonisation of the curriculum a form of ‘censoring of history’ seen in the Soviet Union and China. She explained,

As a history student, I’m a vehement protector and champion of safeguarding our history. It otherwise becomes fiction, if you start editing it, taking bits out that we view as stains. A fundamental part of our history is about learning from it, not repeating the mistakes, being able to analyse and challenge why those events happened, how those decisions were made so that we don’t repeat those actions in the future. If we’re going down this road of taking bits out, are we then going to end up putting bits in that we wish had happened?¹

¹Peter Stubley, ‘Universities minister compares “decolonisation” of history to “Soviet Union-style” censorship’, *Independent* (28 February 2021), available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/history-curriculum-university-michelle-donelan-culture-war-b1808601.html>}.

When the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement reached the UK and led to calls for the removal of Cecil John Rhodes’s statue from Oxford University’s Oriel College, critics took a similarly irreverent tone. The wider intent of the original movement, which began at the University of Cape Town,² was to decolonise the South African university and upend its colonial traditions that ‘minimize African knowledge and experience’ and hinder Black South Africans’ access to higher education.³ However, the Apartheid-era former President of South Africa Frederik Willem de Klerk described ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ as ‘folly’ and its leaders ‘full of sound and fury’.⁴ He added that Rhodes – often considered a symbol ‘of the white-supremacist, colonial rule of southern Africa’⁵ – had made an undeniable ‘impact on history which included the positive contribution of his scholarship scheme’.⁶ Former Australian Prime Minister and Rhodes Scholar Tony Abbott noted that the removal of the statue from Oriel College would ‘substitute moral vanity for fair-minded enquiry’.⁷

The narrative has been equally derisive in the United States. Alongside state legislative efforts to ban critical race theory from classrooms,⁸ President Donald Trump sent a memorandum to all federal agencies, directing them to ‘cease and desist’ federally funded anti-bias trainings that address racism and white privilege.⁹ When asked to explain the purpose of the directive during the first presidential debate in 2020, he said, ‘I ended it because it’s racist. I ended it because a lot of people were complaining that they were asked to do things that were absolutely insane, that it was a radical revolution that was taking place in our military, in our schools, all over the place.’¹⁰ We could also look to Denmark, where public officials led an effort to censure critical scholarship on race and racism, postcolonialism, gender, and migration.¹¹ Eventually, a majority in the Danish parliament adopted a written declaration¹² that called for curbs on ‘excessive activism in certain humanities and social science research environments’.¹³

But why have efforts to decolonise research and teaching become such a political ‘flash point’? Be it, say Loyola University Chicago’s efforts to decolonise the syllabus as means of ‘unlearning the dangerous and harmful legacy of colonization’¹⁴ or Cornell University’s decision to change the name of the ‘Department of English to the Department of Literatures in English’ in order to better

² Britta Timm Knudsen and Casper Andersen, ‘Affective politics and colonial heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25:3 (2019), pp. 239–58.

³ Linda Nordling, ‘After Rhodes Fell: The battle to tackle a racist legacy’, *Nature*, 593 (2021), p. 465.

⁴ Neil Johnston, ‘Removing statue of Rhodes would be folly, says de Klerk’, *The Times* (26 December 2015), available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/removing-statue-of-rhodes-would-be-folly-says-de-kerk-j68zzlq7dmb>.

⁵ Nordling, ‘After Rhodes Fell’, p. 465.

⁶ ‘FW De Klerk criticises Rhodes statue removal campaign’, *BBC News* (26 December 2015), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35181303>.

⁷ ‘Removing Rhodes statue “moral vanity”, says Tony Abbott’, *BBC News* (24 December 2015), available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/35166107>.

⁸ Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, ‘Why are States banning critical race theory?’, *Brookings* (November 2021), available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>.

⁹ Russell Vought, ‘Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies’, Executive Office of the President (4 September 2020), available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/M-20-34.pdf>.

¹⁰ Cady Lang, ‘President Trump has attacked critical race theory: Here’s what to know about the intellectual movement’, *Time* (29 September 2020), available at: <https://time.com/5891138/critical-race-theory-explained/>.

¹¹ Ellie Bothwell, ‘Danish researchers under attack “withdrawing from public debate”’, *Times Higher Education* (13 May 2021), available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/danish-researchers-under-attack-withdrawing-public-debate>.

¹² Folketinget, ‘Forslag til vedtagelse’ (28 May 2021), available at: https://www.folketingstidende.dk/samling/20201/vedtagelse/V137/20201_V137.pdf.

¹³ Sophie Standen, ‘Why are Denmark’s politicians criticising university researchers?’, *The Local Denmark* (9 June 2021), available at: <https://www.thelocal.dk/20210609/analysis-why-are-denmarks-politicians-criticising-the-countrys-university-researchers/>.

¹⁴ Faculty Center for Ignatian Pedagogy, ‘Preparing to Decolonize My Syllabus’, Loyola University Chicago, available at: <https://www.luc.edu/fcipc/anti-racistpedagogy/decolonizingyoursyllabus/preparingtodecolonizemysyllabus/>.

reflect ‘the department’s diverse fields of study’¹⁵ – why are they so concerning to public officials and the target of public policy?

In a sense, this antagonism is all but expected when decolonisation is a structure that, in keeping with the proposals of this forum, seeks to disrupt and dismantle the norms, practices, and institutions that ensure colonial continuity.¹⁶ As such, these derisive and irreverent responses are only a reflection of the realisation that – if successful – the decolonisation agenda would unsettle (and render insecure) the futures of the beneficiaries of colonial norms, practices, and institutions. Yet, in proposing this manner of decolonisation in a disciplinary context, this forum also stands as an indictment of the assumption that science and scientific knowledge production is apolitical in nature. On the contrary, the university is where the rationale for maintaining a hierarchical global order is often formulated and ritually narrated/reiterated,¹⁷ shaping the ‘intellectual orientation of generations of students’ who then go on to normalise and perpetuate these hierarchies through policy, practice, and in everyday life.¹⁸

To be sure, there is ample evidence demonstrating that politics often informs the scientific endeavour. For instance, American racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as social Darwinist ideas adopted and promulgated by the social and natural sciences, were in the background of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted by the United States Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The study led to four hundred African American men in Macon County, Alabama being infected with latent syphilis. Afterwards, they were left untreated to ‘determine the natural course’ of the disease.¹⁹ In 2018, the removal of the statue of J. Marion Sims – the ‘father of gynecology’ who experimented on enslaved African American women²⁰ – served as another reminder of the way race and racism often underlines scientific progress. Indeed, Robert Thom’s oil painting *Marion Sims: Gynecologic Surgeon* is meant to depict Sim’s experiments as a sterile, scientific affair.²¹ The reality, however, could not be more different. As Harriet Washington writes, the scene of the experiment was in fact ‘a violent struggle between the slaves and physicians and each woman’s body was a bloodied battleground.’²²

The politics of scientific knowledge production is also evident in the disciplinary genealogy of International Relations (IR). In the introduction to this forum, I noted that race and racism marked the very foundations of the discipline. But alongside the works of its founding fathers, IR’s racism is also reflected in the way scholars and scholarship, collectively identified as the Howard School of International Relations, theorising the role of race and imperialism in the workings of the global order, were relegated to the margins of IR – this, despite the Howard School being active during

¹⁵Kathy Hovis, ‘Trustees Approve New Department of Literatures in English Name Change’, The College of Arts & Sciences Communication (2 April 2021), available at: {<https://english.cornell.edu/news/trustees-approve-new-department-literatures-english-name-change>}.

¹⁶Somdeep Sen, ‘Decolonizing to reimagine International Relations: An introduction’, *Review of International Studies*, this forum (2023).

¹⁷Somdeep Sen, ‘Colouring critical security studies: A view from the classroom’, *Security Dialogue*, 52:1 (2021), p. 137.

¹⁸Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 5.

¹⁹Allan Brandt, ‘Racism and research: The case of the Tuskegee Syphilis study’, *The Hastings Center Report*, 8:6 (1978), p. 21. See also Susan Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Joseph M. Verschaeve, ‘Scientific racism and human rights violations in our time: Tuskegee must never be forgotten’, *Michigan Sociological Review*, 22 (2008), pp. 222–6.

²⁰P. R. Lockhart, ‘New York just removed a statue of a surgeon who experimented on enslaved women’, *Vox* (18 April 2018), available at: {<https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/4/18/17254234/j-marion-sims-experiments-slaves-women-gynecology-statue-removal>}.

²¹Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, NY: Harlem Moon, 2006), p. 1.

²²Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, p. 2.

the founding years of the discipline.²³ It is also not mere happenstance that indigenous perspectives have been missing from the mainstream of Political Science and International Relations. In fact, in the United States, ‘Native identity, Native philosophy, and Native history’ were actively erased as ‘areas of concern’ for the study of politics since indigenous conceptions of law, sovereignty, democracy and governance undermine the ideology and values of the settler colonial state.²⁴ For this very reason, scholarly efforts to decolonise IR have sought to reassert the importance of the indigenous conceptions of sovereignty and denaturalise ‘indigenous dispossession.’²⁵ Finally, the gendered and heteronormative workings of the global order are also reflected in the disciplinary vocabulary and priorities of IR.²⁶

So, it is not without reason that Jeffrey C. Isaac claims that the study of politics is a ‘contest of perspectives’ in his editor’s introduction to the last issue of *Perspectives on Politics* in 2016.²⁷ But contestation here insinuates a horizontal struggle between different perspectives that enjoy equal/comparable standing within the discipline. This notion of contesting perspectives is what drives the push for more disciplinary plurality. But while plurality is indeed a ‘good thing’, the assumption that this can be achieved by being more inclusive fails to recognise that the lack of plurality is a political choice meant to serve ‘those at the apex of political and economic power.’²⁸ That is to say, the lack of plurality is not just a consequence of a lack of awareness of the existence of other perspectives. What the decolonisation agenda struggles against, is a manner of disciplinary politics – steeped in a colonial legacy – that is driven to keep up a singular, hegemonic perspective on social reality. To be sure, IR is often presented – in research and teaching – as a discipline that is concerned with truth, driven by reason, and primarily focused on the task of *scientifically* validating social reality. However, in practice the ‘appeal to science’ – or trust in the unequivocal validity of scientific knowledge – is strategically invoked to marginalise scholars and scholarship that waver from a hegemonic disciplinary perspective.²⁹ This is evident in David Laitin’s conception of ‘a scientific frame’ in the social sciences that is informed by natural science-like ideas of ‘careful measurement’ as well as clear and formal ‘rules of inference [and] replication’. Such a frame, he adds, is a means of avoiding error and guaranteeing ‘valid inference.’³⁰ In the same vein, in the opening section of their influential volume *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba emphasise that they are concerned with the ‘science in social science’ and conclude that research can successfully interpret social reality

²³Errol A. Henderson, ‘The revolution will not be theorised: Du Bois, Locke, and the Howard School’s challenge to white supremacist IR theory’, *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 492–510; Robert Vitalis, ‘The graceful and generous liberal gesture: Making racism invisible in American international relations’, *Millennium*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 331–56.

²⁴Kennan Ferguson, ‘Why does political science hate American Indians?’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2016), p. 1029.

²⁵Maryam Khalid, Mark McMillan, and Jonathan Symons, ‘Is a pedagogy of Indigenous solidarity possible in the International Relations theory classroom?’, *International Studies Perspectives*, ekab012 (2021), p. 1; see also Franke Wilmer, ‘Indigenizing political science or decolonizing political science’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2016), pp. 1050–1; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2012); Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Paul Frymer, ‘Why aren’t political scientists interested in Native American politics’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2016), pp. 1042–3; Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2009).

²⁶Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989); Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); Judith Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1992); Lene Hansen, ‘The Little Mermaid’s silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen School’, *Millennium*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 285–306; V. Spike Peterson, ‘Feminist theories within, invisible to, and beyond IR’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 10:2 (2004), pp. 35–46.

²⁷Jeffrey C. Isaac, ‘Political science as a contest of perspectives’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 14:4 (2021), pp. 943–8.

²⁸Sankaran Krishna, ‘On the pitfalls of geo-cultural pluralism in IR’, *International Politics Reviews*, 9 (2021), p. 276.

²⁹Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

³⁰David Laitin, ‘The Perestroika Challenge to social science’, *Politics & Society*, 31:1 (2003), p. 169.

only if it ‘follows the logic of scientific inference.’³¹ This ‘appeal of science’ has now been almost institutionalised due to the rise and resilience of positivism in the human sciences³² and it being the central orientating logic of ‘hirings, tenure decisions and grant-giving practices.’³³

In a sense then – seeing as the (a)political nature of science and scientific knowledge is at the crux of the contentious discourse on decolonisation – the task of decolonising universities, schools, and the curricula has come to signify an agenda that is not limited to recognising and remedying the legacies of colonisation in the academy. Fundamentally, it is also about acknowledging the fallibility of what we know. This does not just mean being open to the possibility that there are other ways viewing the world. It is about accepting, valuing, and accommodating the possibility that we may be wrong about our understanding of the world and that this flawed understanding is a culmination of politically driven scholarly and institutional norms and practices. Reimagining the nature and purpose of IR, then requires dispelling the assumption implicit in the writings of the likes of Laitin and King, Keohane and Verba that there is a singular (scientific) frame, means of measurement or rule of inference for understanding a social reality. On the contrary, it is about leveraging the multiplicity of scholarly works cited throughout this forum that reveal the colonial, imperial, racist, and gendered roots of a discipline like IR to forefront the reality that scholarly knowledge production is a political affair.³⁴ And since this politics is intertwined with our empirical priorities, methodological approaches, and theoretical assumptions, reimagining IR requires a political response (like decolonisation) that empirically, methodologically and theoretically forefronts marginalised perspectives and experiences in studying and understanding a social reality.

That said, adopting this disciplinary approach also unsettles the idea that there is a social reality that can be studied, measured, and validated using the ‘right’ scientific frame of assessment. There are of course generally observable and identifiable social, political, and economic phenomena, conflicts, instances of contestation, and crises that are of interest to a discipline like IR. However, accepting that a certain politics that informs our understanding of a singular social reality, also allows for the possibility that every social phenomenon can be experienced in a multiplicity of ways – each of which makes for its *own* social reality. In ‘The Speed of Darkness’, American poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, ‘The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.’³⁵ Making the political choice to decolonise and rethink IR in the manner proposed in this forum then opens up the possibility of accounting for the many ignored stories that constitute what the global order is and how it is experienced.

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³¹ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 229.

³² George Steinmetz, ‘Introduction: Positivism and its others in the social sciences’, in George Steinmetz (ed.), *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1–56.

³³ Somdeep Sen, ‘Colouring critical security studies: A view from the classroom’, *Security Dialogue*, 52:1 (2021), p. 138.

³⁴ Somdeep Sen, ‘Race, racism and the teaching of International Relations’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2022), pp. 1–20.

³⁵ Muriel Rukeyser, ‘The Speed of Darkness’, Poetry Foundation, available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56287/the-speed-of-darkness>