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decolonising discourses as symptoms of morbidity

Alka Sehgal Cuthbert

The central argument in this paper is that the claims of decolonising discourses are a morbid symptom of a theoretical and political impasse. By decolonising discourses in education, I refer to those theories and practices that are premised on the idea that political decolonisation in the post-war era has been insufficient to establish equality or justice. The socio-political power relationships from the past are, it is claimed, imprinted in the knowledge and knowledge practices of the West and, as such, strategies of reparative purification need to be constructed and implemented.

Introduction

The central argument in this paper is that the claims of decolonising discourses are a morbid symptom of a theoretical and political impasse. By decolonising discourses in education, I refer to those theories and practices that are premised on the idea that political decolonisation in the post-war era has been insufficient to establish equality or justice. The socio-political power relationships from the past are, it is claimed, imprinted in the knowledge and knowledge practices of the West and, as such, strategies of reparative purification need to be constructed and implemented. Intellectually, the roots of decolonising theories can be traced at least to the disenchantment with western liberalism and modernity, eloquently voiced by Marcuse in *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), and in the subsequent development of southern/global/post-colonial theories that seek to establish contemporary effects of colonialism in former colonized societies (Athyal, 2015).

The broader influence of postcolonial theories in cultural institutions, where it often morphs with academic-activists' calls to decolonise content, established criteria and practices, is more recent. The student 'Rhodes Must Fall' protest at the University of Cape Town in 2015 garnered wider publicity and support among student activists primarily in Anglo-American élite universities. At Oxford University, a Rhodes Must Fall campaign was launched in 2016, while at Cambridge University an interdisciplinary seminar series on Decolonising the Curriculum was held at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in the same year. Also in the same year, Britain's first Black Studies degree was inaugurated at Birmingham City University. Throughout this period, a network of Black and Minority Ethnicities network has been established, often with official/informal support from Student Union bodies.

Political Morbidity

Politically, decolonising discourses are a morbid symptom in the Gramscian sense: they are a product of an impasse in the established political arrangements in the context where the ruling élites of the Western world lack the moral or political legitimacy needed to act in ways that could address

the signs of system-level morbidity (McNally, 2015). Theoretically, decolonising discourses are [a] morbid symptom of a pre-existing problem [which] Bourdieu had described (in relation to the current state of sociology in academia) as intellectual stagnation due to 'theoretical formalism and positivist hyper-empiricism drowned in data.' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 46). Moore and Muller are concerned with the same problem, which they describe as one of increasing sterility of abstract and classificatory scholasticism (Moore & Muller, 2002). The former refers to when theory (in this case sociological) lacks sufficient external language of description by which to construct adequate empirical correlates needed for empirical research (theoretical formalism). The latter is when empirical research lacks adequate theoretical conceptualisation or is read in theory-denying naturalistic terms. Essentially, this means that data from, or of, a single variable, statistics on pay differentials, for example, cannot be reliably interpreted as conclusive evidence of institutional racism, which is a complex and relational social phenomenon.

In terms of maintaining or extending democratic forms of governance there is little positive on offer from decolonising discourses because they are based on prioritising minority political and cultural rights over majority political rights and *normative values*. This means that the claims of decolonisers reach beyond the political or public sphere, and into the realm of interpersonal dispositional virtues. It could be construed that their concern is less with democratic politics so much as ensuring their epistemological and moral authority is established and maintained by any means and at whatever cost to established majority groups. One example of how this can play out is the concept of micro-aggressions which are used to ethically delegitimize opinions that run counter to the assumptions of decolonising discourses, and rule them beyond public debate. The concept of micro-aggressions, introduced within the disciplinary delineations of psychiatry by Chester Pierce in 1970, has been expanded, via psychology, as a legitimate description (in some quarters) of normative behaviour of the majority of people in the Anglo-American world, most of whom are white-skinned.[1]

Decolonising discourses have gained influence in academic and cultural settings, but since they are likely to lack wider support, decolonising proponents often require the protection of a new arm of quasi-state bodies to act as cultural gatekeepers in their favour. The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) is one example. This major educational charity in the UK, funded by Higher Education Funding Councils and direct subscription, published figures for the distribution of first class, or upper second-class degrees. Recent reports show that between 2007/8 and 2011/12, 74.5% and 82.3% of white students gained these degree levels, compared with 37.7% and 43.2% of BME students[2]. For Omar Khan, Director of the Runnymede Trust, a major race equality think tank, such statistical discrepancies suggest that Oxbridge and Russell Group of universities is failing to

"(…) think harder about how its framing is heard by potential black applicants: claims that it's all about excellence and standards implicitly send the signal that black students aren't achieving enough. The continued reference to excellence as a justification for the low numbers of black applicants may become a vicious circle."[3]

Khan's interpretation of the ECU's statistics, in keeping with decolonising discourse assumptions, is incorporated into the ECU's work and fuel ever weakening boundaries between research, activism and policy.

Decolonising – A Response to Rising Racism?

The 2018, post-Brexit British Social Attitudes survey found that 17% of respondents thought that

immigrants had a negative economic impact, and 23% thought that they undermined cultural life whereas in 2011 figures for both questions were around 40%.[4] These large-scale empirical findings should at least give pause for thought before accepting strident assertions of institutional racism or the prevalence of micro-aggressions made some of today's decolonising anti-racists to justify their demands. This central tenet of their argument, that in Britain systematic racism continues unabated, is not supported by empirical evidence or anecdotal everyday experience. For example, in the UK, three major posts in the current Conservative government are held by Asians: Priti Patel (Home Secretary); Rishi Sunak (Chancellor of the Exchequer); and Suella Braverman (Attorney General for England and Wales).

In itself, the presence of ethnic minority people in political office does not disprove the existence of structural inequalities, but structural inequalities do not exist in unchanged form over centuries as some claim. Like capitalism itself, forms of inequality are adaptive; and new winners and losers are made, and re-made, in the process. For anyone concerned with societal improvement at national or international levels, there is a need for fresh thinking to identify, understand and explain new social trends and problems. There is little evidence that decolonising discourse is capable of contributing to such a task. If it seeks to directly change society or societal norms, it needs to provide knowledge from which public arguments can be construed with a view to enriching debated and critical scrutiny, not close off or rule out of court. Although academia is, by nature, a specialised endeavour, there needs to be some level of public assent as most universities in the West are funded by the public purse. More importantly, they have been long associated with contributing, however indirectly, to the public good; not the moral improvement of the public, a task normally associated with religion.

The influence of decolonising discourses in academia and cultural bodies has taken place over the same time frame as the divide between the values of higher education and those of the public at large (in the UK) have grown wider. Runciman (2016) argues that universities have played a major role in attempts to change society's normative values and that this, rather than age *per se*, is a main driver in political events, including the Brexit result, which many tried to explain as a generational divide. Runciman writes that in as much as age played a part, it was because a smaller proportion of older people were likely to have gone to university. Educational experience is also a significant variable in differing attitudes to immigration as found in one of the major surveys of social attitudes in 2014.[5] It is true that there has been a rise in negative views about immigration since the late 1990s, although these have remained stable for more than a decade. But this rise, like the Brexit referendum, and the recent general election, has taken place against the background of a growing socio-cultural and values divide between social and political élites, and the rest of the population. It would be reductive in the extreme to interpret the rise as conclusive evidence of rising racism among the older generation. With its fuelling of such a fundamental value divide, and its cavalier disregard of the norms of rational knowledge and discourse, it is hard to see how the decolonisers could garner sufficient public support needed to effect the changes they seek *along democratic lines*. This may be why Michaels, in reference to America but his argument also holds in the UK, has concluded that contemporary anti-racism is a new form of class politics in that it offers an apologetic for capitalism's new élites (Michaels, 2018). Having provided an account of decolonising discourse as a politically morbid symptom, I now turn to looking in more detail at its theoretical weakness.

Epistemological Morbidity

Priyamvada Gopal, a Cambridge academic writes:

"Decolonising the curriculum is, first of all, the acceptance that education, literary or otherwise, needs to enable self-understanding. This is particularly important to people not used to seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of conventional learning."[6] The quotation is particularly pertinent in light of Dipesh Chakrabarty's question 'Can thoughts transcend places of their origin? Or places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories?'. Gopal's assertion is predicated on particular models of education, knowledge and learning. In the sphere of epistemology, decolonising discourses seek to challenge the role and status of disciplinary knowledge and abstract thinking. It is claimed that these epistemological claims are little more than an attempt to justify the *status quo*, which in turn is a justification for the continuing depredations rooted in the colonial experience. Power, it is alleged, must always leave its imprint.

The first point to make in response to Gopal's characteristic claim is the solipsism of her definition of both the general aim of education (self-understanding), as well as the purpose of the curriculum, to mirror the imputed experience of selected minority groups. The analogy of a mirror suggests she is operating with a simplistic and naturalistic epistemological model of knowledge rather than a symbolic model in which all texts exist within conceptual systems that require cognitive and imaginative interpretation: there is no straightforward mirroring of experience. To be fair, she would not be alone in this: one of the unintended consequences of decolonising discourse may well prove to be a welcome re-focusing on neglected areas of epistemology and aesthetics as higher education has been largely re-shaped under managerialist and faux-market principles. It may well be that the ethical thinness of new managerial and regulatory bodies in academia predisposes them to accommodate, or actively support, decolonising activism: the passion lends a veneer of ethical commitment lacking in performative technocratic culture.

However, in itself, decolonising discourse is not able to overcome its internal contradictions political or epistemological. As Muller (2009) points out, without some kind of epistemological criteria, how could there be any basis for generalisation? And without generalisability, a claim can only be accepted on testimony or by sanction. Testimonial trust is characteristic of knowledge relations in everyday life, but in institutions of higher learning, this form of epistemological validation has long been superseded by disciplinary norms of knowledge production established in modern universities (Moore., 2009; Wellmon, 2015). Rejecting these norms without a better replacement can only lead to disciplinary communities being replaced by socio-political communities; and knowledge claims authorised solely on the basis of holding the sanctioned values and political beliefs.

The Need for Theoretical Abstraction

Bhambra's (2011) criticism of sociology, or rather classical sociology claims that historical sociology is intrinsically deformed and prejudiced not only because it has marginalised indigenous knowledges but because it has also prioritized theoretical abstraction (Weber's ideal types being one example). The centrality given in Western academia to theoretical knowledge necessarily involves "a voluntary distortion of empirical phenomena" (Winch, 1947, p. 68). Bhambra acknowledges that the substantive content of both history and sociology has changed, but that the meta-principles of historiography have not. It is these epistemological principles, by which knowledge in history is made, that she objects to because of the arising exclusion of non-European works from canonical or disciplinary knowledge of academia. Consequently, she welcomes the questioning of the possibility of objective knowledge introduced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, and concludes:

"This pressure has been expressed as a suspicion toward positivist explanatory paradigms and their presumed associations with power, with a shift from causal explanation to reflexivity, deconstruction and interpretation . . . if we now understand dominant discourses as Eurocentric, it is because of new voices emerging in wider political arenas and in the academy itself" (Bhambra, 2011, p. 2).

It is true that postmodernism questioned the possibility of objective knowledge, but they were hardly the first to do so. She seems to use the term "positivist" to imply a strawman model of all explanatory paradigms, ignoring the fact that positivist paradigms have been thoroughly critiqued in the past, not least in important philosophical debates about knowledge, from Hume to Popper's work on falsification. To claim that "reflexivity, deconstruction and interpretation" are categorical opposites to "positivist explanatory paradigms" simply shows very little awareness of how debates around language, concept-formation and application, and aesthetics have progressed.

For Bhambra, theoretically abstract concepts, such as Weber's ideal types, simply replicate historical, colonial processes of extracting what is valuable as if the production of knowledge and culture more widely were synonymous with capitalism's relations of production. Bhambra misunderstands what ideal types are: they are not empirically descriptive concepts so much as concepts which "best reveal common features which would be blurred in the majority of instances, but which nonetheless are empirically observable" (Winch, 1947, p. 73). Empirical data, no matter how rich in description or statistical support, is difficult to interpret at higher levels of generalisability or universality without theoretical integration.

At their best, empirical cases can interrogate ideal type accounts and can function as a form of verification of theoretical accounts, but they cannot themselves provide resources for integration. Theoretical integration requires an intentional bracketing of meanings which are located in social or personal experience, and a relocation of everyday concepts into disciplinary contexts. In this way, ontologically complex and multivariate social phenomena, that are less open to direct empirical observation, can be better conceptualized, and fresh insights garnered, which can improve the state of existing knowledge (Moore, 2009; Muller, 2000; Wheelahan, 2012; Young & Muller, 2016). Without ideal types, which Bhambra alleges perpetuates a colonialist *episteme* it would be very difficult to integrate knowledge across particular spatial and temporal contexts: each segment of knowledge would remain boxed in the socio-cultural determinations of its producer/s. Simply enlarging the range of socio-demographic groups who participate in knowledge production on its own could not perform an equivalent epistemological function; and, consequently, risks reducing knowledge to the scale of interpersonal experience.

Conclusion

The decolonising critics of disciplinary or abstract knowledge, like their feminist and certain leftist forerunners are right when they point to the exclusionary dimensions of academic knowledge, but this does not *per se* entail the existence of a simple identity between cognitive process for appropriating social reality and the expropriation of this process along with everything else by rich and powerful and their institutions.

It is certainly true that disciplinary knowledge needs the input of fresh outlooks and experience in order retain and improve its intellectual powers: revision and/or extension of canonical texts are to be welcomed as long as epistemological and aesthetic criteria are met. But if fresh insights from

experiential knowledge remain un-integrated theoretically or aesthetically, they are likely to have weak powers of explanation and generalisability. If one considers other characteristics of knowledge, especially in the humanities and social sciences, such as argumentation, more finely tuned judgment and interpretative complexity which has fidelity to empirical sources, then knowledge claims generated by decolonising discourses do not fare well, as argued above. Adopting decolonising strategies for the core curriculum risks doing a disservice to the very people it is said to liberate.

The intellectual weakness of decolonising discourse means it requires other means of support. Just as politically, its advocates need to rely on protection and sanctions enforced by new bodies, intellectually the strategy is often to de-legitimise contrary opinions and knowledge claims on ethical grounds as being racist. It is one thing to counter knowledge claims with which you disagree with different, possibly better claims. It is another thing altogether to attempt to de-legitimise the very intellectual apparatus by which abstract knowledge, needed in the pursuit of truth, is secured. Ernst Gellner (1996) writes that truth is not something that all societies value at all times: taken by itself, it has no particular political allegiance, hence it is frequently distrusted by social élites. If academia wishes to retain its intellectual autonomy and re-establish stronger public trust, it should be making every effort to counter the ethical and intellectual corrosive effects of decolonising discourse (through public debate rather than legislative means), not to ignore its weaknesses and to flatter its advocates in the name of an ersatz social justice agenda.

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alka sehgal cuthbert

Alka Sehgal Cuthbert is an educator and independent researcher/writer on liberal education and social realist epistemology and its implications for the school curriculum. She works as a teacher for the educational charity Civitas, and she is a school governor at the East London

Science School. She writes for public, professional and academic publications and is co-editor of, and contributor to What Should Schools Teach? Disciplines, subjects and the pursuit of truth (IoE UCL Press).

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